

# WINTER'S TALES



*Edited by*  
*A. D. Maclean*

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

*Winter's Tales 9* has contributions by six of the best-known living short-story writers. Mary Lavin, Doris Lessing, Edna O'Brien, V S Pritchett, Muriel Spark and John Wain. They need no introduction and their stories speak for themselves. Two more, Diana Athill and Margaret Laurence, are on the way to the top. Diana Athill deservedly won the *Observer* Short Story Prize in 1960 with *The Return*, and Margaret Laurence's most impressive first collection of stories *The Tomorrow Tamer* has just been published. Terence Kelly and Robert Rubens make their first appearance anywhere and both have first novels coming in 1964.

Robert Rubens is also the editor of a new (and rival) annual collection of short stories *Voices 1* to be published by Messrs Michael Joseph. *Winter's Tales* offers a welcome to *Voices* together with the hope that they are not going to put us out of business.

Last year's *Winter's Tales* had a very friendly reception from the critics, who gave pride of place in the collection to L P Hartley's *The Ghost Writers*. It would be interesting to know from individual readers which story they like best in *Winter's Tales 9*. A prepaid postcard is enclosed for anyone who cares to let me know.

Next year, in addition to *Winter's Tales 10*, we shall publish *Winter's Tales from France*, which will be edited by Christopher Burney.

A. D. M.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*The Small Bequest*, by Mary Lavin, appeared in a selection of her short stories, *A Single Lady*, published by Michael Joseph

*The Speech*, by V S Pritchett, was first published in *Queen Magazine* in 1962

*The Gentile Jewesses*, by Muriel Spark, has appeared in the *New Yorker*



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# *'This is my Daughter-in-Law'*

DIANA ATHILL

COLONEL MILLETT'S two goats had hides dappled brown and white, slightly flop ears and broad bony foreheads on either side of which their yellow eyes looked sardonic. He liked their knobby yet delicate joints, their hollow flanks and the bold inverted peaks of their udders. When he approached them there was something amusingly insolent in the way they cocked their heads at him, then hiccoughed so that a bulge of cud would slide slowly up their throats, and their lower jaws would start to move rapidly from side to side as they chewed.

They were called Milly and Kate. Milly had the more docile temperament and was the better milker, but Kate was the Colonel's favourite. She liked to spring on to the roof of the potting-shed which was built against a bank so that on one side of it the tiles were not far from ground level. Some dim echo of crag-perching would stir in Kate and she would stand on the ridge, hooves bunched together, looking disdainfully at the tit-bits with which the Colonel tried to tempt her off it. She reminded him of

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Sophie, his dead wife, who used to have just that way of going off into some small, stubborn wildness of her own, from which she would relent only if given her head. Sophie once took a volume of Walpole's letters with her when they went to dinner with the Leepers as they did every three months or so. 'I bore them as much as they bore me,' she had said. 'It will be much more sensible to do something I enjoy.' Hugh Millett had known better than to argue with her, though he had been on tenterhooks for half the evening. Because he had kept quiet she did not start to read.

Colonel Millett had started to keep goats after Sophie's death, seven years ago, when his younger child — his daughter Bridget — had brought her family home on leave. Her little boy, fussy about his food, had refused to drink cows' milk to which he had become unaccustomed while living abroad. After the family had left the Colonel found that he had come to enjoy looking after the animals and would be even more lonely than usual if he got rid of them. He persuaded the reluctant Vicar to take his surplus milk (it was a small living, the Vicar had four children, and the Colonel would accept no payment). The goats were a tie, but a tie was what he needed, a man rising seventy, living alone in the country, does not wish for time in which to realize how easily he might live anywhere else.

He spent a lot of time planning little treats for

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the goats He would stand in his paddock, stroking his moustache, pondering where to tether them near the clover patch by the gate, or on the site by the hedge where they could get a nibble of hawthorn for a change? They relished the leaves of trees, so he would sometimes break off a few beech branches to suspend from the beam in their shed, putting in a spray of copper beech for what he imagined to be its different and more interesting flavour The shed would smell so fresh and leafy that his own mouth would begin to water, and he would smile when he brought the goats in that evening, knowing that they would push eagerly ahead when they saw the branches and would begin to tug at them at once 'That's my girls,' he would say 'Munch away To-morrow I'll see if I can get some oak leaves for you'

Mrs Picton would have nothing to do with the animals She lived rent-free in the back wing of the house in exchange for cooking and cleaning, while her uncle came twice a week to help in the garden The Pictons were a disagreeable, in-bred family, known in the village for their squints and their grudging natures, but Colonel Millett liked to believe them kind and loyal at heart When his daughter had complained that Mrs. Picton neglected him he had demed it angrily, saying that only he could know how much she did for him, but privately he sometimes wished that she would display her good qualities more freely There were

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evenings when he came in from the garden to notice that the house smelt dead. In Sophie's day it had been open-windowed and flowery, but now the smell of stale cigarette smoke and even of dust hung about the curtains and upholstery. Once he was settled by the fire with his radio, his books, his ordnance maps and his drawing things (he was Consultant to the local Catchment Board on problems of land drainage) he was comfortable enough; but he did not look forward to coming in.

There had been moments in Colonel Millett's life when he had been embarrassed by the notion that he was a good man. Sophie used to tell him he was, but that meant nothing because she loved him, and he knew there was no merit in being a faithful and tender husband to someone who, for thirty-two years, had never failed to charm, amuse and surprise him. The embarrassment had come on occasions when he was unable to help noticing that actions or sacrifices on behalf of others, which seemed to him unquestionably necessary, did not seem necessary to many of the people he knew. When he was still a serving soldier few of his fellow-officers were as concerned as he was over his men's comfort and welfare, while in his private life none of his relatives and friends seemed to share his sense of a man's own unimportance in relation to other people. He was a contemplative man rather than a quick one, but he was not a

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fool he could not avoid a shrewd idea of how he stood morally compared to the majority of people, and this perception shocked him. The shock did not come from the greater selfishness or weaker scruples of others, but from the image of himself being smug, or indulging (as he would not have put it) in spiritual pride. Such an attitude was so repulsive to him that he dismissed it with the conclusion that a man was born selfish or unselfish, lazy or scrupulous, just as he was born with blue eyes or brown if he was a decent chap it was a matter of luck rather than of virtue

This was why the Colonel had never felt quite comfortable with his younger child, Martin, once the boy had grown out of childhood. Martin, inheriting his father's disposition towards self-abnegation and his mother's livelier temper, went further than being a decent chap. He had developed from being an unusually biddable and confiding little boy into a youth so intensely aware of moral issues, interpreting so literally and so militantly the teachings of the Protestant faith in which he was reared, that his parents could hardly feel it normal 'It's a phase, he'll grow out of it,' they had told each other, but he did not grow out of it. Long before he left his public school he had decided that he would go into the Church, and at the age of twenty-two he was ordained

It was disconcerting to have a son who insisted on going into the Church, but it was not something

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to which either Sophie or Hugh Millett, unquestioning Christians as they were, could openly object. What they *did* object to was the kind of church the boy went into. He joined an Anglican order which worked chiefly in the mission field, took a vow of celibacy and poverty, and was sent to South Africa. He might as well have become a Papist. When his father tried to dissuade him he said 'Dad, surely you can see. If the things we believe are true they *must* become the supreme factors in our lives, they are the only important thing, not something we can fit neatly into odd corners of our existence. How can I possibly believe that Christ is the Son of God, with all its implications, and not put my life entirely at His service?'

The Colonel was silenced by the logic of this. He went up to bed and told his wife 'There is nothing we can do, sweetheart. He has got to go ahead if he feels it's right.' But he was not happy about it. He felt uneasy at the contrast between Martin's attitude and his own, and resentful that his son should make him feel uneasy. 'Can't he see,' he asked himself, 'that his mother's suffering will be just as real as that of some unknown black man?' It was confusing to be put in a position of disapproving of actions motivated by goodness, and he ended by rationalizing the confusion into anxiety based on Martin's emotional nature. Did the boy really know what he was doing?

And perhaps Martin had not known. He wrote



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only a bald statement of the trouble into which he ran after he had been three years in South Africa. His parents knew that he had been working in a 'non-European' township outside Johannesburg, that he had identified passionately with African interests, and that he had come to detest the policy of apartheid, but they never knew the exact nature of the dilemma in which he found himself when his dedication to his work with Africans came into conflict with his obedience to his order. It was only later, and from someone else, that they learnt of his complete nervous breakdown under the strain of this conflict. At the time all they knew was that his superiors had recalled him, he had refused to obey, and that he was no longer in holy orders.

Understanding that he must be suffering bitterly, they had begged him to come home. He had refused. Sophie had written suggesting that they should visit him in South Africa instead. He had implored them not to. They had not over-ridden his wishes and were still debating whether they had been wrong when Martin wrote that he was about to leave South Africa for Brazil. He had been offered a job there, he said, and he must take it because he was about to get married and could not continue to live in South Africa. The girl he was marrying was an African.

'He must have done it to save her,' Sophie had sobbed, for Martin had explained that Lorene ('Such a dreadful name'), who had worked with

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him while he was still a priest, had been in trouble for her political activities and could only leave the country by subterfuge 'He probably felt that it was his fault that this girl became rebellious. He's made himself a martyr!'

The Colonel agreed that this could have been so, but he wondered privately whether the boy's years of celibacy had laid him open to the power of lust. Some hot black girl, the boy an idealist, feeling that he must make amends.

Neither of them considered the possibility that Martin might love Lorene.

Hugh and Sophie Millett were not people to cut a son off, but from that day the thought of Martin could give them nothing but puzzlement, anxiety and sorrow, and both of them were secretly relieved that he had chosen to live on the other side of the world. To begin with they spoke as though the marriage would certainly break down, but it did not. Letters were exchanged at Christmas and birthdays, and Martin, whose work was with an international philanthropic organization, sounded satisfied with the job, the place and his home life. At the first Christmas Sophie jibbed at buying a present for 'that girl', but the Colonel pointed out how hurt Martin would be by the omission, so she went into the cathedral town and bought a gaudy scarf which she thought hideous. 'I believe they like bright colours,' she said angrily,

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throwing it on to the hall table After that their festivals were marked by a series of ugly garments or accessories crossing the Atlantic, with letters written by Sophie to Martin, to which the Colonel would add a page ending, 'Give our best wishes to your wife' Martin would write back, 'Lorene asks me to thank you for your charming present,' and Sophie would say, 'She might have taken the trouble to add a p s at least She used to do clerical work for him, so presumably she's *able* to write'

The couple had no child until five years after their marriage — the year Sophie, so suddenly and incredibly, died of cancer She never saw the little boy's photograph, which was also the first of Lorene that Martin had sent Looking at it, Hugh Millett knew that she would have kept silent, holding it at a distance because of her long sight, her pretty mouth pulled crooked at the bitterness of not being able to enjoy her son's first child

The baby — David, they called him — was beautiful, with enormous eyes, but he was very dark-skinned. more so than the woman whose rather worn face was smiling above him The Colonel studied her more attentively than he did the child. His own private theory had been wrong, anyway she was no hot black girl Her hair was flattened unbecomingly with grips, her blouse, which did not fit well, was prim. It was hard to tell from the photograph, but it seemed probable

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that her complexion was a sallow brown. Her features were delicately but distinctly negroid. Her face expressed gentleness and shy pride. 'She looks quite a nice little thing,' he thought dully. 'What possessed the boy?'

. One morning in March, seven years later, with no anniversary, festival, birth or death to evoke it, a letter came from Martin. The Colonel opened it eagerly — he bore his loneliness with stoicism, but it was painful. Before he had finished the first paragraph his interest had turned to dismay. Martin's organization was sending him on a three months' visit to England, and he was bringing Lorene and David with him. They would have to spend most of the time in London, but he hoped that to begin with they might stay for a week or so with his father. They would be arriving in May.

There was no complexity in the Colonel's first reaction. He simply did not want them to come. He rejected the prospect so instantly that he was up from the breakfast table and over by the dining-room window without thinking of it, staring out into the garden with his back to the partly-read letter as it lay among the toast crumbs. A little later, when he had brought himself to read it to the end, it became worse. Then he was appalled by his own reaction. Martin's marriage was a disaster, he had never doubted that, but was it possible

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Even in such circumstances that a lonely old man with only one son should learn of that son's return after fourteen years with feelings such as these? He put the letter back into its envelope and shut it in his desk, then got out the car and drove the ten miles into the cathedral town, which he would not otherwise have done until the afternoon, telling himself that he must collect his library book, but really doing it because he wanted to get away

He remembered his father's death, which had happened when he was serving in India. He had never been close to his father, but that had been shocking too he had felt nothing. Then, too, he had wanted to get out of the house. He had ordered his *sals* to bring round a pony and had ridden off down a dusty road. But his father was never going to appear on his doorstep to confront the inadequacy of Hugh Millett's emotion, whereas Martin . He would have to invite people to meet them, he supposed the Vicar, the Leepers 'This is my daughter-in-law This is Lorene' As though it would be necessary to say it, when every eye would be glancing in her direction from the first moment. An animal picking up the mood of the herd to which it belongs must experience much the same sensation as the Colonel's irrational panic at knowing what his friends would be thinking on such an occasion. A few of his acquaintance simply would not come. The Prestons could not even be

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asked — Mrs Preston would take the invitation as an insult. But most of them would turn up out of sympathy with him, would do their best and would think their thoughts.

'I am glad,' he said to himself for the first time in seven years, 'that Sophie is not here.'

By the time he got back to the house the Colonel knew that, whatever his feelings, a man could not rebuff his son after fourteen years. 'Dear Martin,' he wrote, 'I shall of course be glad to see you and hope that you will come straight down here. You must not expect a gay time, since I now live a very quiet life.' Writing the letter, going through the motions of normal behaviour, settled him a little. He ended with, 'Tell your wife to bring warm things for herself and the boy because she will find the climate here, even in summer, rather different from what she is used to.' Then he put on overalls and went out to whitewash the goats' shed, although the light had gone and he would have to use a lantern. It was important, he felt, to go on as though nothing had happened, and the little bleat with which Kate greeted him, and the way in which she nibbled at his trouser-leg, were curiously reassuring.

The goats were the first thing Martin and his family saw when, in the car he had hired in London, they turned in at the drive. They were tethered near the gate that day

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‘Look, Mama,’ said David ‘Goats — they’re rather like Tiki and Bambi, are they Grandfather’s?’

‘He didn’t use to keep them,’ said Martin ‘Perhaps he lets someone have the grazing’

So the first thing the boy said after he had shaken the Colonel’s hand was ‘Are those your goats, Grandfather, or do you let someone have the grazing?’

‘They are mine Milly and Kate’

‘May I milk them sometimes? I know how to milk’

‘No, no, David,’ said Lorene, ‘help with the bags, dear, and don’t start worrying your grandfather so soon’

She had not spoken before, had only smiled when Martin introduced her, and the Colonel was relieved to hear her precise, soft English. He had not consciously expected her to speak some sort of pidgin, knowing that she had an education and had been married to Martin for so long, but something inside him must have been half expecting her to do so.

She was a small woman, better dressed than he had envisaged from memories of the photograph, wearing a neat coat and skirt and a plain felt hat. A respectable little body, she looked, in a way less difficult to take than the tall man beside her, who had Martin’s grey eyes — Sophie’s grey eyes — in a lined face, and whose suit was too light in weight and colour, too wide at the shoulders, too loose in

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the trouser-leg Martin looked a foreigner. Bending down to pick up a bag, the Colonel went further. Martin did not look quite a gentleman. His shoes were of bright tan-coloured leather, woven criss-cross.

'You must be tired after your journey,' said the Colonel, 'you will want to wash,' and got rid of them in that way for a few minutes. Mrs Picton's expression as she carried a suitcase upstairs was enigmatic, but he had seen her in the hall staring with distaste at the light palms of Lorene's hands. He had explained to her that his son's wife was a foreigner, a dark-skinned lady, and she had remained ominously silent during the preparations for the family's arrival. The Colonel went into the drawing-room and poured himself a small whisky.

When they came down he soon saw that Lorene was just as disconcerting as Martin, after all. Married to an Englishman for so long, living in a country where there was little colour prejudice, she was unaccustomed to thinking of the racial difference between her and her husband. She knew only too well, from bitter early experience, how white men could think of coloured people, and she knew from Martin that his father was the kind of white man who *would* think of coloured people in that way, but she no longer exposed raw nerves to the situation. Although she was shy and nervous at this difficult meeting, it was not primarily because of the colour of her skin or the cut of her



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features She seemed, the Colonel thought, to feel that she was an *ordinary woman* She crossed the room to look out into the garden, leaning on the window-sill 'It's so strange,' she said, 'to see a place you have heard so much about I thought I would know what England looked like, but I didn't

'Lorry was shocked by London,' said Martin 'She didn't expect it to be so dirty'

'We passed some men washing a house,' she said, 'and the washed bricks were bright red but the rest was *black*'

That she should emphasize the adjective so nonchalantly startled the Colonel, but she went on, without noticing, to ask how people kept the insides of their houses clean when the air was so dirty, and then to say, with a quick apologetic look at the Colonel, 'But this is beautiful, so green and rich Were those buttercups we saw in the fields as we came along?'

The boy leant beside her, peering out under her arm Except for his frizzy hair he might have been a little snub-nosed Spaniard — a very dark one If the Colonel, travelling abroad, had seen him playing in a street, he would have thought, 'What a bright, attractive-looking little fellow,' but to remember that this child was his grandson .

'Well, Martin,' he said quickly, 'what are your plans?'

They had arrived towards evening and were

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still tired from their journey, so Lorene put the boy to bed early and soon followed him herself. Martin told the Colonel about his job, described Lorene's part-time work in a dispensary for poor people run by some nuns, and at last spoke about Sophie. The Colonel was embarrassed by his son's lack of conversational inhibitions — the way he came out with, 'You must be desperately lonely, I've been worrying about you', the way he said in so many words, 'I wish Mother had not hated me marrying Lorry — yes of course she did, don't be silly. I wish they could have met.'

'It was a shock,' said the Colonel stiffly. 'It was not what she — what we — hoped for. I have never thought that any mixed marriage . . .'

'Dad,' Martin broke in — the first time he had reverted to the word — 'when you know that girl — I'd have gone mad at one time if it hadn't been for her, and if I'd had all the women in the world to choose from I couldn't have found one to suit me better.'

'Well well,' said the Colonel, pulling at his moustache, 'it's a funny life. Isn't it time we turned in?'

Later, when he was coming back from the bath-room, he passed the spare-room door which was ajar. Martin was still moving between that room and the boy's, sorting out their things. The Colonel heard Lorene saying sleepily, 'You know what you must do to-morrow? You must write to that house agent.'

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'All right, *Mrs Evans*,' said Martin, laughing.  
'You wrote it in my diary this morning'

Who was *Mrs Evans*? What family joke-language did she belong to? The exchange gave the Colonel an odd feeling — it might have been a scrap of dialogue between Sophie and himself

'If one couldn't *see* the girl' he thought

The Colonel milked the goats early, so next morning he was up before the others, out through the fresh, bird-loud garden and settling himself on his stool as though it were a normal day. He had made a bench for the goats to stand on when being milked so that he did not have to bend double to reach their udders, and there was the usual scuffle when they tried to get on to it simultaneously. Kate was the more pushing of the two so he did her first, giving Milly some food to keep her quiet. He was half-way through, the jet was beginning to come unevenly, when he heard a sound at the door of the shed and looked round to see David watching him.

'Hullo,' he said. 'You're up early'

'I've been exploring — Mama and Daddy said I could. I found a bird's nest with eggs in it.'

'What were the eggs like?'

'Blue, with black spots on them.'

'It was a thrush's nest, then'

'May I come in and see the goats? Which one is which?'

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The Colonel told him, and he squatted to stare into Kate's face. Her yellow eyes stared back, then she stamped her foot and shook her head, irritated by a stranger's presence.

'Bambi used to do that when she was cross — she's a goat I know at home who belongs to Conchita who does our washing. She only has one tit because she hurt the other on a piece of corrugated iron.'

'Do you like animals?'

'Some of them. Not pigs, very much. May I milk Milly?'

'Goats don't like being milked by strangers. It makes them hold back their milk. But all right, you can have a shot if you like.' The Colonel had been sure that he would refuse the child, but David's expression made him feel churlish. He had forgotten the absolute power an adult has over a boy of seven, and how hard it is to exercise it harshly when the boy is trusting in its benevolence.

Milly began to fidget when she saw David sitting on the stool. The Colonel held her head, saying, 'Watch out for the pail. She may kick it over.' Very confidently David settled the pail in the straw on the bench, bent forward so that his round black head was against her flank — the bench made her almost as tall in proportion to him as a cow would have been to a man — and went to work. The first pulls were unsuccessful, the milk spurting sideways and going up his sleeve, but he

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adjusted his hands and was soon managing a thin, irregular jet in the right direction

'You can milk, too !' said the Colonel, and the boy turned his head and gave him a delighted smile, his small, widely separated teeth gleaming 'Conchita taught me,' he said, and became absorbed

'Funny little chap,' the Colonel thought, looking down at the delicate coffee-coloured neck where it disappeared into a white shirt 'I wonder what will become of him None of it is his fault '

He finished Milly off when David's hands became tired, and together they took the goats out to the paddock The boy chattered — he was accustomed to being mostly with adults and spoke to them as equals — and the unusual experience of sharing his interest in the goats with someone who took it with an equal gravity was agreeable to the Colonel If this child had been white, he realized, he would be a grandson to welcome natural, co-operative, interested in everything, ready to like and to be liked By the time they went in to breakfast the woolly head and the little hands which to him looked monkey-like were beginning to move the Colonel not to distaste but to a curious sort of pity He thought again 'It's not the child's fault '

It was clear that Martin's family could not be confined to the house for the whole of their visit Colonel Millett dreaded venturing out with them, but Martin could not spend twelve hours a day

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writing letters and reading, someone so alien as Lorene could hardly be expected to go to work about the house as his daughter Bridget did on her rare visits, and whereas Bridget's children ran off to the village to renew acquaintance with the Vicar's youngest, and the Leepers' grandchildren, and the various village children with whom they would play for hours by the stream, or with their bicycles, to whom could he introduce David with the certainty that he would be welcome? He plumped for a picnic on the first day, chiefly because the road to his chosen place did not run through the village. The few people they met looked with curiosity at his exotic companions, but they did not necessarily know that he was with his family.

The things which upset him about Lorene were not the things he had expected. There was nothing *outré* or bizarre about her, nothing uncouth — as he had thought the night before, if he could have kept his eyes shut she might have been a white woman. But she could not have been a white woman of his own class. 'They can't take to it naturally,' he thought, not defining to himself what he meant by 'it'.

Lorene was by nature earnest, scrupulous and something of a fusser. These were aspects of a candid and courageous personality, but that afternoon they betrayed her into a certain awkwardness. She was determined that she and her son should acquit themselves properly in an English way, and

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she had only an uncertain knowledge of the English way. So she dressed David and herself for the picnic too tidily, scolded him too anxiously when he got his knees dirty, was too precise and formal in her language, sometimes using 'refined' turns of phrase — 'I beg your pardon?' instead of 'what?', 'ever so pretty' instead of 'lovely' — as damning, to the Colonel, as any crudity.

Martin became irritated as the afternoon went on. 'Do relax, Lorry,' he said crossly when she began to chide David for a jammy mouth. 'Everyone gets sticky on picnics. And why did you put him in his best flannels, anyway? He ought to have his jeans on.'

'He can't go about in those old jeans here,' she said. 'What would his grandfather think?'

'The others do,' said the Colonel. 'Biddy's children — jeans and those little jersey things they call something-or-other shirts — J-shirts, is it?'

'T-shirts,' said David. 'Can I wear my T-shirts if they do, Mama?'

'Well yes, if your grandfather says so.' Lorene felt that she might have been making a fool of herself and looked down at her hands in a way she had when she was hurt.

When they got back to the house Mrs. Picton came through from the back and said, 'Excuse me, sir, but may I have a word with you?'

'What is it, Mrs. Picton?'

'Would you mind just coming into the back for

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a moment, sir?' she answered, with a significant look at Lorene

His heart sinking, the Colonel went down the stone-flagged passage into the house's old kitchen, now Mrs Picton's sitting-room. When his house-keeper turned to face him she was flushed.

'You know I don't mind putting myself out, sir,' she said. 'I've always tried to do everything I can, I'm sure — I'm not one to spare myself. But I never bargained for having to scrub a bath out after a lot of darkies and I don't think it's right.'

The words which came instantly into the Colonel's head were, 'There are only two of them,' and how could he say that? The woman stood opposite him, her hands folded on her stomach, on her face a disgusting triumph of righteous indignation over fear, and he could not speak. The several impulses she had set in motion were simultaneous, and simultaneously were choked into silence by answering inhibitions. Was his anger going to make him say, 'Get out!'? Was his fear of losing her — and what would he do without her? — going to make him say, 'I know how you feel, Mrs Picton, but it's not for long and I'll be grateful . . .'? Was his reason going to make him say, 'What nonsense, they are as clean as you and I'? Or was he going to escape from the room as soon as possible by saying 'I'll wash the bath myself'? He was more fatigued than he knew by the agitation of his son's visit. He was at a loss



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Mrs Picton's expression became more apprehensive. The Colonel was breathing heavily, the veins on his nose were showing purple against the sudden pallor of his skin, and after a second he shut his eyes.

'It's not what I'm used to' she was beginning, when he said abruptly, 'I will speak to you later.' He went quickly out of the room, along the passage and into the downstairs lavatory.

After dinner that evening — a silent meal — Colonel Millett did two things. First, carefully casual, he announced to Martin and Lorene that he was inviting the Vicar and his wife, with the Leepers, to meet them for drinks in two days' time, then he explained that when the house was full Mrs Picton found the work a little heavy. He hoped they would not mind doing a few things to help her, such as cleaning the bath after they had used it.

'I always do,' said Lorene, surprised. 'I've been worried about all the work we must be making, but I wasn't sure if I should suggest helping — people have their own ways. But of course I'd like to do anything I can.'

'You just give the orders, Dad,' said Martin. 'We're neither of us used to all this idleness, are we, darling? I've been wondering how long Lorry would be able to keep her hands off the vacuum cleaner.'

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'No, no no!' said the Colonel urgently, horrified at the idea of Lorene's meeting Mrs Picton on her own territory 'I wouldn't dream of it, and you're here for a holiday, anyway It's just a few little things, like the bath'

Next day the Colonel told Mrs Picton coldly that he had explained to his son and daughter-in-law how much work there was in the house, and that Mrs Millett had offered to clean the bath. Partly frustrated and partly alarmed by a manner so different from his usual courtesy, she contented herself with mumbling that she had only one pair of hands, and quickly switched on the coffee-grinder. While he was getting out his car — he and Martin were going to cash cheques and post letters — the Colonel still felt the acid taste of this compromise at the back of his throat, as though he had indigestion.

They left Lorene sitting on the lawn with her knitting and the papers, and saw David as they passed through the village. He had taken his social life into his own hands by finding a bicycle belonging to Bridget's children at the back of the garage, and setting off to explore. The Colonel had not deliberately concealed the existence of the bicycle — he supposed that he must have failed to mention it because he thought the child young to risk the traffic on the roads — and now the boy had asked for it and his parents seemed confident of his road sense, so that was that.

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As they drove by David was squatting on the stream's bank near the bridge by which the road entered the village, scooping up mud with a piece of wood in order to build a dam across a miniature bay. He was attended by a tow-headed pair from the blacksmith's family, a boy and a girl both slightly younger than himself.

'He'll be leading a gang before we get back,' said Martin proudly. 'He was born bossy — I don't know where he gets it.'

'From his grandmother, I suppose,' said the Colonel, with the sense of play-acting which always came when the *ordinariness* of Martin's family emerged in their conversation.

'Do you approve of him?' asked Martin, whose habit of speaking as he felt continued to disconcert his father.

'He's a very bright little chap. Nice manners, too.'

'That's Lorry — she's a stickler for manners. Overdoes it sometimes, I think. She's nervous, of course, about the impression he'll make here, particularly on you. This trip isn't going to be easy for her.'

The Colonel was silent. He was aware that he had been thinking of 'this trip's' difficulties mainly in terms of himself, a state of affairs disagreeable enough without further complications.

That day went by smoothly. Mrs. Picton, checked by the Colonel's cold reception of her

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complaint, had time to persuade herself that she had won her point, and to realize, incoherently, that there might be more satisfaction in martyrdom and gossip than in losing a good job for the sake of her principles. The Colonel, spending several hours alone with Martin, began to appreciate the company of a man of such diverse and exotic experience—he rarely had the chance to talk with people outside his narrow circle. Lorene, rested from the journey, watching father and son as they thawed, was able to relax and to observe her father-in-law and her surroundings with interest and even amusement instead of with unmingled nervousness. And David, full of birds, goats, bicycles and now the friends he had made by the stream, was happy.

'I like your house, Grandfather,' he said before he went to bed. 'Is it the biggest house in the village?'

'I suppose it is.'

'Is it the biggest house in Kent?'

'Not by a long way.'

'Those other houses must be very big, then. Do you know the people who live in them?'

'I know some of them.'

'Do they have goats too?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Norman and Evie don't either. I told them they couldn't come and milk Milly and Kate because goats only let down their milk for their families.'

'Run along, darling,' interrupted Lorene. 'It's bed-time, I've told you already.'

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'What one-up-men children are,' said Martin laughing, when David had gone upstairs. 'It's a pity your house isn't the biggest in the county, Dad, but at least you've got goats. You'll get by.'

Perhaps they would all get by, the Colonel thought at the end of the next day. Perhaps he had been exaggerating the problems attached to this visit.

He could not retain any doubt as to the happiness of Martin's marriage — indeed, his son seemed closer to his wife than Bridget's husband did to her. more dependent on her, showing more evident pleasure in their relationship. 'Almost like us,' the Colonel thought again, in astonishment. At tea-time Martin, describing how their first house in Brazil had burnt down, had said, 'We've been through a lot together, one way and another,' and that was the impression they gave — two people whose contours had rubbed, through the years, into shapes which fitted smoothly. It still seemed extraordinary to the Colonel, but it was beginning to seem less indecent. He was beginning to wonder, as he might have wondered about any woman, what Lorene was like.

It was not easy to tell. Lorene was quiet, talking little when they were all together, concerned chiefly with the domestic affairs of her family — whether they should buy David some new shorts, where Martin had packed his notes for a conference he

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was to attend. But when she did join in a general conversation she spoke with confidence and good sense. She seemed to be a little humourless, but twice the Colonel had heard her laughing, once in the bedroom with Martin and once in the garden with her son — a chuckling, uninhibited African laugh, which startled him. It was what he thought of as 'a native's laugh', but coming from Lorene it could hardly be taken as an indication of mindless ribaldry. It was a sound he despised, yet at the same time a sound which suggested something more engaging than the rather prim front Lorene had so far shown. The Colonel did not know how to digest it.

Martin was still thin-skinned, he could see that, still emotional and extreme in his opinions, though now with an occasional tartness of cynicism. Perhaps he would find him irritating if he were with him for long, but he could not deny that his son's open and simple manner towards him was warming. Many of Martin's opinions he would never be able to accept, but they were so clearly dictated by the earnest pursuit of right, which he remembered from the boy's teens, that he had to respect them. And his conversation was amusing, he had seen and done so much. The Vicar and Edmund Leeper — this was the real reason for the Colonel's optimism — the Vicar and Edmund Leeper had enjoyed their little sherry party with considerably more animation than was usual in his drawing-room.

He had approached that occasion as a penance

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for his compromise with Mrs Picton, but he had been spared. His friends had appreciated Martin, they had seemed to be charmed by David's short appearance as a hander-round of salted almonds, and Lorene's dress had not been unsuitable, her shyness had not been awkward. Indeed, at one moment he had thought that he detected a shade of ironic amusement in her reception of the careful friendliness shown by his guests. She was less stilted in her manner than she had been to begin with when she was with him alone. It occurred to him for the first time, as he watched her, that she had probably met more people, of more different kinds, than he himself had ever done, and that her earlier lack of ease had been due less to the fact that she was coloured and he was white, than to his being Martin's father whom she was meeting for the first time. Once or twice she slipped into the 'refined' expressions she used when she was trying too hard, but she held her own.

'Yes, she held her own,' thought the Colonel that evening. But he wished that at one point she had not put her hand over Martin's. He had understood very clearly what was passing through the mind of the Vicar's wife as she paused for an instant in what she was saying, her eyes fixed on those contrasting skins.

'My dad says your mum's a nigger,' Norman, the blacksmith's youngest son, had said to David

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on their second morning together. He said it not as a joke but as a matter of fact, and David, who had never heard the word 'nigger', took it as such.

'No, she's not,' he answered. 'She was born in Africa.'

'Is that why you and she's brown?' asked Norman, and David nodded, too busy poking at a clump of water-weed in an attempt to guide a stick-boat back into the current to pay much attention to the conversation. Since then his new friends had seen no reason to refer to the colour of his skin, and the only effect of his foreignness on their relationship had been that it gave him an advantage over them because of the strange things of which he could boast. Norman and Evie were a placid pair, too good-natured to resent his airs when he told them that in Brazil he did this, or ate that, and that he had flown in a Caravelle. They protected themselves by not listening very closely to matters so remote from their experience, but on the whole they were impressed.

It was not until a week had passed that their elder brother and two friends of his, boys in their early teens, happened to settle idly on the parapet of the bridge while the children were playing on the bank below.

Martin had taken the car out that morning. Lorene was in the drawing-room, trying to get Sophie's old sewing-machine going, it had been



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the Colonel's idea that she should use it. He was in the garden, staking plants in the herbaceous border, when he saw David running across the lawn.

'Hullo there,' he called. 'You're back early. Couldn't you find your friends?'

The boy shied away from him, stopped, then began to walk on slowly towards the house, hunching his shoulders and hanging his head so that his face was not easily seen.

'You look a bit down in the mouth,' said the Colonel, emerging from the flower bed. 'What's wrong?'

The child turned his head away and muttered something inaudible, so he went over to him and put his hand on his shoulder, stooping to see his expression.

'Have you been scrapping or something?' he asked.

David began to speak, then stopped. He was not yet crying, but he was on the edge of it, clearly afraid that words would break his control. Seeing his trembling lower lip and desperate eyes, the Colonel went cold. None of the many trivial things that could have marred a small boy's morning occurred to him.

'What have they done to you?' he exclaimed, without knowing that he was going to say it, without knowing where the fear from which the words sprang originated. David's eyes began to brim and his mouth went square. Gripping the thin shoulder

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more tightly, the Colonel turned towards the house and called, 'Lorene, come here' I think something's wrong'

Lorene appeared at the French window at once As soon as he saw her, David broke from his grandfather's grasp and ran to her 'What is it, darling?' she asked, and he flung himself against her, pushing his head into her stomach, sobbing now without restraint

Lorene knelt down and held him away from her so that she could examine his face, shaking him gently as she said, 'It's all right, love, it's all right Look now, stop crying and tell me what's happened Be a big boy, now What will your grandfather think?'

The Colonel, hovering behind the boy, gazing anxiously at the pair of them, could not at first distinguish the words jolting out between the sobs.

'Who was it?' said Lorene 'Was it Norman?'

'It was the big boys,' burst out David 'The big boys came . . . they came they said "Dirty little nigger boy" . they said "Push him in the water and see if it comes off" they tried to . . Mummy, *why* . ', and the rest was submerged in tears

The Colonel's whole face contracted So violent was his sensation of mingled rage and despair that for a moment he swayed He began to move towards David, reaching out his hand, but as he did so Lorene, who had pulled her son against her

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body and was patting his shoulder, looked up. Her face was expressionless. She fixed the Colonel's eyes with her own, and almost imperceptibly she shook her head. Then she got to her feet, with her arm round David's shoulders, and said with minimizing briskness: 'They are just silly, ignorant boys, dear. No one minds what boys like that say. Now come inside and wash your face — come on, love, that's enough.'

When Lorene had taken David into the house the Colonel began to walk towards the herbaceous border in which he had left his fork. He found that his knees were shaking. The words, 'They should never have done it, they should never have done it', were churning in his brain, and he did not mean the boys. He could see David in his mind's eye, as he had seen him from the car, the first morning he had played with Norman and Evie absorbed, confident, telling the younger children where to reinforce the dam they were building. 'Poor little mouse' Sophie used to say that to the children when they hurt themselves. The trembling attacked his jaw. With rage he protested against this excruciating grief for his grandson, turning his thoughts savagely back against Martin and Lorene: what would become of the child? 'They should never have done it.'

He went indoors and splashed cold water on his face. He could hear no sound from David's

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bedroom. He wanted to go up, but he remembered Lorene's warning eyes fixed on him over the round black head. 'Best leave it to his mother,' he thought, and went into the drawing-room, found *The Times*, which he knew he would be unable to read, and sat down to wait.

Twenty minutes later he heard them coming downstairs. The front door opened and shut, then Lorene came into the room, crossed to the sewing-machine and picked up the oil-can and cleaning rag as though nothing had happened.

The Colonel put down his paper and said abruptly 'I'll go and speak to those boys, or their father, this afternoon.'

'I don't want to make any trouble,' said Lorene in a neutral voice.

'Is the boy all right?'

'Yes. I told him he could go and play with the goats, do you mind?'

'Of course not.'

It occurred to the Colonel that this was the first time he had been alone with her for more than a few minutes at a time. Not only were the two of them alone in a room, but they were alone together in this situation — and it did not help him to guess what she was thinking. Their dry exchange seemed inadequate, her calm almost indecent.

'This sort of thing,' he said. 'I don't like to think . . . What does it do to . . .'

Lorene put something down on the table with

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a sharp click, and turned towards him. 'Calm?' Her expression made him flinch, but she spoke evenly.

'What does it do to who?' she said. 'The child and me — or you?' It's done nothing at all to me, I can promise you, and it's not going to do anything to him.' Her face, usually so mild, was almost arrogant. She was no longer a plain little woman, but an ugly, formidable one. 'He's got to get used to such foolishness,' she went on, her voice becoming a little shaky but her gaze steady. 'He'll meet it again — he's lucky he's never met it before — but he'll manage, don't you worry.'

'Foolishness?' said the Colonel. 'You call it foolishness?'

She came across the room and stood squarely in front of him as he sat in his chair, the cleaning rag dangling from her hand.

'It's made you feel bad, hasn't it?' she said, and to his amazement she smiled at him — an odd smile, whether pitying or mocking he could not tell. They were seeing each other now, watching each other's faces intently, questioning each other. Suddenly, Lorene dropped the oily rag and bent forward, half crouching, hands on knees to bring her face level with his. He thought she was going to shout at him but her voice was soft, almost a whisper. 'I call it foolishness,' she said, 'because that's what God must call it or he'd have you all frying in Hell.'

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'My dear girl !'

'I'm sorry' She rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand and went back to the sewing-machine Reaching clumsily for the oil-can, she knocked it over

'There now !' she exclaimed 'Just look what you have made me do '

Those, thought the Colonel dimly, through his shock, were the most natural words she had spoken to him since she came into his house Reacting automatically, he stooped, picked up the rag, and mumbled, 'Here, catch You can mop it up with this '

'Thank you' She did not turn round, and a second later he realized that she had started to cry

Even at a moment of such tension the Colonel registered that the situation was becoming 'a scene' and braced himself against his own disarray He was terrified of 'scenes' But what he was prepared for did not happen he was not appalled — he was hardly even embarrassed Lorene had snapped at him, Lorene was crying, and from both there came — he did not understand why — a feeling of appropriateness. He heaved himself out of his chair and went over to her

Should he put his hand on her shoulder ? He had done it, anyway 'There now, cheer up,' he said. 'Don't cry You said yourself that he'll manage. He's a plucky little chap, a sensible little chap I tell you what I'll do, I'll go down to the

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village now, I won't wait till after lunch '

Lorene seemed to be no more embarrassed by her tears than he was

'That would be a good idea,' she said, sniffing 'Better do it now, before Martin comes back. He gets upset '

'You're all right ?'

'I'm fine Goodness, if there was something wrong with me whenever I cried I'd be dead by now, I'm a fool about crying, you ask Martin '

'Well then, I'll be off '

While he was fetching his walking-stick, the Colonel wondered what he was going to say to the blacksmith or his children He felt very tired and confused Where would he begin and, once he had begun, where in God's name could he end? 'If Martin had listened to us . . ' he thought, still protesting, but now more at his own involvement than at David's future 'Foolishness,' his transformed daughter-in-law had said It would make a beginning, anyway, and he supposed that once he had begun the rest would follow

# *Carnival in Trinidad*

TERENCE KELLY

CHRISTOPHER FAIRFAX had been my partner for about two years by the time that I decided the only solution was to kill him. It is difficult now to remember when it was it first occurred to me that there was no alternative, but I think it was probably at the Andersons' cocktail-party when he was invited to stay with the select few for dinner and I was not. That may seem a small reason for wanting to kill someone, and, of course, if it had only been incidents like that I should never have had the idea at all, but the affront was symptomatic of all that had happened since he had first come out from England to take over the Trinidad practice. In the old days, in London, when Fairfax really had been a junior partner, I had been very close to the Andersons, so much so that they used to give little dinner-parties in my honour whenever I came out to get away from the English winter for a month or two. Now they did not even bother to issue their invitations directly but added them, like post-scripts — when they thought of it at all — at the end of their interminable chatty telephone conversations with Fairfax, and he would relay the



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message in his bluff, hearty, spurious voice while his eyes across the office desk discouraged my acceptance. I never knew whether the discouragement was double-think, because he always seemed to have an insight into the way I would react and there was nothing that gratified him more than to be the presence at a party to which I came on sufferance.

You may wonder why I promoted him from junior partner in London to senior partner in Trinidad. The answer is, I did no such thing. It was Her Majesty's Inland Revenue that promoted him. The law relating to overseas partnerships is very simple. As long as you leave your profits overseas and make no attempt to participate in control or management of the business, the Government is happy to whistle for its share of tax. I don't like lawyers but they have their uses, and I always do what they advise, and so Mr Christopher Bingham Fairfax was elevated when I decided to hve Trinidad off and make it a separate affair. I can remember as if it were yesterday the diffident way he accepted the suggestion. It wasn't that he cared for the responsibility, but if it was a good thing for me and for the firm then he was prepared to shoulder it, and I remember the firm handclasp and the true blue of his eyes as he took his copy of the document.

It's a funny thing how someone can work for you in the same office and you can see him every

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day for ten years and still be hoodwinked as to the man he really is, and yet in half a dozen letters, when he is five thousand miles away, you can read his substance. I think I liked him then, when he was in England. It's all so clouded now that I find it difficult to remember. But the way I liked him was not the way the Andersons and all the others came to like him. I liked him in the way a buidler likes his foreman, so that we always had an easy camaraderie that ended when the door had closed. It was always Fairfax on one side and Mister on the other, and I think that was the first thing in his letters which provoked me, when he dropped the Mister.

Even so, it would not have signified, none of it, if things had gone on in the way they always had, with London all-important and Trinidad a trifling enterprise.

Now Trinidad is paramount. I won't say Fairfax made no contribution, but he did not have to start as I did, years ago, unknown, he built on a foundation, a foundation I had laid. People have short memories. I wonder how soon they will forget Fairfax now that he is dead.

I keep coming back to the Andersons, but there was much more in it than just that. There was the financial aspect. Things fell apart at the seams in London when we had the credit squeeze. It didn't work like that out here. When I remember how he used to thank me for his bonus, and after

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Only a year in Trinidad he had the *Financial Times* sent out from England and spent an hour every morning working out how much money he had made . I wonder how long it will be before someone thinks to cancel that damned pink paper. Thank God I won't have to watch him push aside the morning post in that irritating way he had, and cut the string, and fold and unfold it, this way and that, casually, as if it were of no importance what the figures said, when it was all he thought about, morning, noon and night, money and how long it would be before he could leave the tropics and buy that house on the golf course he was always boasting he was going to have That's how he saw himself . a suburban squire He wasn't very good at golf I could always beat him, but just the same they'd have made him captain in a year or two. He had the manner He'd taken care to cultivate it It was all there. The pipe and the big smile and the belly laugh That damned laugh. You couldn't be in the same room with him without having it rammed down your throat every few minutes, and the other fools used to laugh with him, and they'd all be standing around in a group laughing their stupid heads off at some inane remark he'd made. It was just like that at the Andersons' the night I knew I couldn't stand it any longer. I'd have sent him packing back to England, there and then, if the agreement would have let me. But I couldn't The Inland Revenue

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and the lawyers and Mr Christopher Fairfax had seen to that. There was nothing I could do, nothing. My own business and I couldn't buy a twopenny stamp unless I got him to agree. The staff knew how it was. I could see it from their silly, supercilious faces whenever I made suggestions. They'd give me lip service and no sooner had I gone than they'd be back doing it the way he'd told them to. They knew how it was all right, they knew that I couldn't do anything except draw my share of profit. But they didn't know the way he used to milk the business so that the profits were ridiculous. He had a name for generosity. In two years he never bought a drink that wasn't paid by me. My God, when I think back on it. The clubs and the cars and the petrol and the restaurant accounts. He used to laugh when I objected. He used to say it was good for trade. Like that last party he gave on the day of Carnival. He didn't give it because it made him big and self-important, he gave it because it was good for trade. He was full of pet sayings. Like 'not spoiling the ship for a ha'porth of tar'. He never did that, not when I was paying for it. That day at Carnival. He took the best suite overlooking the Savannah, the one with the balcony that stretches all along its length, and he had them fix a bar so that everyone could help themselves. Everyone. Not just the Andersons and people like that, but everyone. The hangers-on and the waifs

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and strays and the inebriates and anyone who happened to pass the door

But I didn't mind then Not that day Not that day because it was his last I knew that night at the Andersons' I would kill him on the day of Carnival The second day of Carnival, if I am to be precise Perhaps I ought to tell you something about Carnival in Trinidad or you won't really understand why it should be so perfect But I can't describe it well enough Not so that you could know what Carnival is really like You have to be there in the streets, amongst the people, with the steel bands and the shuffling feet and the sizzling heat and the costumes, the fantastic costumes It's not any one of these things, it's all of them and more It's not just the performers, the shuffling thousands punch-drunk with the beat from a thousand pans, it's the spectators who aren't spectators but part of Carnival It's not like the Lord Mayor's Show with Floats as isolated incidents and the people lining the streets good-mannered and good-humoured with a policeman here and there to keep it nice and tidy That's just what Carnival isn't. It's got its parts, but the parts aren't isolated, they're blended like fine brandy And Carnival in Trinidad doesn't just occur like the Lord Mayor's Show occurs. It builds up. It starts when Port of Spain and San Fernando and Arima start jumping up weeks before, and it creeps into you, insidiously, the beat and the steel pans and the excitement.

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I've seen it happen I've seen the judges and the lawyers looking down their Roman noses when the jump-up starts, and I've seen them at the Country Club when Carnival is dying, jumping up with a little stick between their palms and their eyes closed and the sweat running down their faces I've seen the girls holding the stick with its end pressed into their navels and their bodies swaying and the pans and the kettles and the brake drums thumping I know what it's like at Jou Ouvert when the cocks crow on Monday and the bands start collecting at Santa Cruz and Maraval and at Curepe and march their way into Port of Spain I've seen the people gather in the streets, the blacks and the whites and the in-betweens and the Indians and the Chinese and the Negroes They gather and they crowd and they follow the bands They spill from the pavements into the gutters, and they shuffle so that you can hear the thud and the shuffle and the tramp of a thousand feet echoing the beat of the pans. I've seen the way it builds up right through Monday into Tuesday when the big bands form Not just scores but hundreds, maybe thousands. And all in masquerade. Kings, queens, soldiers, sailors, Saracens, Crusaders, Ethiopians, Assyrians, Egyptians, witch-doctors, savages, thieves and murderers. Red, blue, gold, yellow, white, pink, puce, ebony Swords, daggers, armour, lace, shields, cutlasses, visors, helmets. Glistening black bodies, head-dresses, tunics and skirts and

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tattered jeans I've watched them as they march  
A hundred Vikings and a score of drums and the  
shuffling shuffling feet and the swaying sweating  
bodies, and five hundred Seabees drab green be-  
neath the cruel sun, and then Atlantis with flying  
banners and ostrich plumes and blood-red cloaks  
lined in gold, frosted breastplates over turquoise  
habits embroidered in strange arabesques, wild eyes,  
black faces, silver helmets and a hundred spears  
waving to the poignant, sad and strident wave of  
sound, and the people mingling, pulsing, shuffling,  
dancing, talking, singing, shouting and moving with  
the stream.

I've seen it in the hotels with all order gone,  
with the public rooms cluttered and the bar packed  
like matches in a box, with jump-up in the foyer  
and rowdy parties everywhere There are no parts  
in Carnival that can be separated and Carnival isn't  
here or there. It's in the hotels as it is in the  
streets or on the green Savannah, and there is  
laughter and singing and jumping up and the sound  
of drums There are sleepers lying anywhere and  
drunkards comatose There are sudden shrieks and  
falling bodies. There could be no better time for  
murder

The door was open, jammed with a wedge so  
that they could see he had no enemies. Come in  
and be my guest. Take a glass and empty the  
drink that someone left unfinished and fill it up  
and meet my friends out here on the balcony, the

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biggest balcony in Port of Spain You know the Andersons, of course, and Edgar? Look, there's Sir Archibald, down there and to the left It's very kind of you, I'll come if I have time I'm going home on leave in May, we'll meet in Verreys No shop to-day Who's that? Why, that's my partner I go across out of obscurity I didn't know you had a partner, Chris I am dismissed or just forgotten The tablecloth is stained with rum and Scotch and burnt with stubs from cigarettes, and the bottles are in disarray amongst the dirty glasses I empty something into gin or water and swill the glass with tonic and fill it up again My body seems to soak the spirit into it as if it has no stomach I can feel the shape of the knife inside my pocket, see it as if I held it in my hand It is a very cheap affair, a piece of metal stuffed into a wooden hilt A plain deal wooden hilt They sell them for the fishermen to cut their lines and slit the throats of fish It has a little scabbard A tawdry piece of leather roughly sewn and around the handle a thin strip with a press-stud like they have on gloves. A knife too cheap to save, too commonplace to claim The people come and go and drink my drinks and smoke my cigarettes and thank my partner for his hospitality The perfect squire upon his balcony. He comes across the room but someone calls him back and he laughs, a belly laugh He takes his pipe and fills it with it in his mouth, grinning his amiable fatuous grin along its



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length His fingers work the tobacco into the bowl and when it is full search for his matches, in his pocket, but the true blue eyes are steady, as they always are. Another group come bursting through, shouting to him from the doorway, and squeeze their way on to the balcony, drawing his attention to something down below and all of them lean over calling to someone underneath. He clasps his fists together above his shoulder and shakes them in the manner of a boxer before the fight begins, and then they all troop out, brushing past me as they go, and leaving me alone with the debris and the stale sweat and smoke. The noise of the steel bands marching through sweeps in as if their voices had formed a barrier now removed, and I go on to the balcony and look down at the street narrowed by the teeming jogging mass into a ragged strip. Ahead, a vast contingent of marines, their helmets camouflaged as if for jungle warfare, their wooden rifles ported, have broken ranks and prance and jog and sway into the Savannah. Behind, a forest of thin lances, picked out with yellow pennons, flashes the sun and jugs up and down pre-saging some historical facsimile and attracts the crowd which lifts itself on tiptoe, and in front, a pasticcio of individual players mimes people of strange times and places. A witch-doctor, with a head-dress ten feet high and eight feet wide yoked around his neck, a gaudy patchwork of white, red and yellow plumes with horns of brilliant blue and

### *Carnival in Trinidad*

a crown and dress of gold, dances savagely, mocking a bishop in pearls and white with cope and shepherd's crook, a knight in armour, with a purple cloak and a shield quartered in red and orange and emblazoned with an eagle, feints with his staff towards the Queen of Zanzibar.

. I could go into the streets and stand amongst the crowd and let the pans drum out my rancour while there's time I could take my petty hatred and drown it in a sea of sound and sweat, until there's only my feet and fingers, hands and toes and hips and head moving to the insistent beat that's over Trinidad I could be there with the rest of them, jumping up, until the rum pours from my body in the heat, and envy, pride and malice are words that I have never heard I turn towards the door decided, but decision comes too late, for the whole gang with throats parched from screeching, heads towards the room and blunders through the door, and the Crown Corks flick and Carnival retreats until it is an exhibition like the Lord Mayor's Show. The belly laughs are back and the drums are gone and patience comes to aid my resolution I pour another drink and wait and listen.

I said that it was strange how a man could be anonymous although you thought you knew him. It's just as strange how when that anonymity has gone at last, you can feel his thoughts as if they were your own or even more than that, how you can understand him as he cannot understand him-

*Terence Kelly*

self It was like that when he came over I could tell he was aware there was something that was not as it should be on the day of Carnival When he felt unsure his *bonhomie* would swell like the stupid puffer fish that blows itself to an enormous size at hint of danger He talked of business and spoke in clichés, he said the ground was laid, the seeds were sown From now on we would reap He wiped the grin away and replaced it with his business look, made openings for me to speak, listened with gravity to what I had to say, and nodded in agreement as if I had explained away his problems We'll talk about it after Carnival, he said, as if we had disposed of what we had to say and he could return to the balcony with the menace exorcised There's just one thing, I said What's that Not here He shrugged his shoulders and left the room with me He did not even think to say good-bye They never even saw him go

The hall was emptyish A girl and a man cuddling in a corner, a lift attendant who had shirked his chores talking to a maid The staircase was nearby There were three floors below us. Six flights. Fifty, sixty steps, I thought He went ahead holding his pipe to his mouth with one hand, the other sliding down the hand-rail I took the knife from my pocket, the pocket of my bush-coat, and slid it gently into the pocket of my trousers. I could feel the touch of wood against

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my fingers and with every step the movement of the muscles of my thigh against my palm I looked to see what hint the knife would give, and saw the crease that ran from my knuckles to its point, and watched the way my trousers belled to my knee and straightened with every step I took. I used the second flight to synchronize our steps so that when the time came I would find the spot as I had practised in my bedroom. He was taller than I or it might have been impossible. I watched his shoulders carefully and the way his hips swung a little with every step he took. You can spend a lifetime and never know the way a man walks down a staircase, and then in a dozen stairs you can learn how every muscle works. I watched the way he took a firmer grip to swing himself around the inside of the staircase on the second floor, the way he left his hand behind so that mine sliding down almost touched it and then the way he swept it forward ahead of him. There was no one on the second floor and there'd be no one on the floor below because the canopy cut off the view from the bedrooms there. I would have liked to kill him so that he would have stumbled down the final flight into the crowd in the foyer, but it would have been a ridiculous thing for just the moment's pleasure. The place was on the landing between the first and second floors. I listened, but there were only the more distant sounds. There was nothing on the first and second floors and going

*Terence Kelly*

higher they would use the lift. I saw his foot reach for its last step but one and took the knife from my pocket openly and raised it up until it was at the level that it had to be, and I ran my hand ahead of me and grasped the rail and pulled my body forward. I felt the pressure of my toes against the stairs and concentrated on the spot I had to strike. He had one step to take and I one thrust and only one. His foot reached for the landing and mine pressed hard against the stair, and I took the knife as firmly as I could and launched myself upon his back and saw the colour and the pattern of his shirt and then my wrist and palm were tight up hard against it. I knew I had struck it where I should and I pulled backwards and sideways on the hilt and the loosened blade remained inside him as I had intended. I had no feelings as I saw him fall, sprawling his way and sliding down the stairs, but I heard his pipe rattling ahead of him and saw it bounce clear on to the hall before I turned away and went back up the stairs. I went into the toilet and took the tissues from my pocket and wiped my hand and cleaned the handle to the knife, and then I flushed the tissues out of sight and dropped the handle down the letter chute outside, and walked through the open door and back into the room.

It seemed a long time to be standing there wondering how soon they would find him and whether I should go to the balcony so that they

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would know that I was in the room, but Anderson came over to fill his glass and make his duty call. We talked banalities until the conversation died. Where's Chris, he said. I've no idea, he left ten minutes back. He nodded and went back to the balcony. I followed him. It didn't matter now to go across and join them. I leaned over the rail and looked into the street. There was a hint of evening in the sky. I was perturbed at the void where feelings should have been. There was no relief or fear or triumph. Not even apprehension. It was as if it had not happened, as if below there was no curious mob goggling at what was left of him, no body leaking blood. I thought of why I'd killed him and now the reasons seemed as small as the fact that he was dead. I wondered if he'd finished on his back or on his face. If on his back they'd think he was another drunk and walk all round him grinning, but if he'd finished on his face there'd be an inch of knife protruding and they'd know, and then they'd be asking how on earth you found a policeman in the midst of Carnival and there wouldn't be anyone who'd want to lose the sense of holiday, and they would be irritated that he had to choose so unfortunate a time to be a murderer's victim. They'd call the manager as if it were his business and he'd come over, pushing through the scrum, cursing the inconvenience of it and calculating its effect, and then they'd call the police who would have to fight their

*Terence Kelly*

way up through the crowds I could imagine the police car honking and hooting and the people jumping up in front of it, and all around it, thinking it was part of Carnival, and the constables and the detectives deserting it despairingly and pushing, shoving, prising their way through the mass — so that by the time they finally arrived there wouldn't be a single person who could really say how long it was since they had found the body I realized that I would see when they were here, and I visualized the Inspector with his peaked cap and his baton and his putteed legs, elbowing his way, and I think it was then that I felt the first emotion What was so odd about it was that I felt exactly as I had at school when they had dared me to commit a school-boy crime and I had done so and they had all lost interest and the punishment was bitter in my mouth I could sense the fear creeping and crawling and I sought to summon up my loathing of him as an ally, but I could not picture him, only the patterning of his shirt and the hollow firmness of his back where my palm had struck it and I could not hear his laugh, only the skittering of his pipe ahead of him I could remember nothing of what it was that made me hate him, I could only remember the sickening thud of his face upon the stairs and the way he slithered downwards with his body jiggling over every tread. There was nothing of him when he lived that I could call to mind and nothing to offset the dismal qualms that

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came by stealth and filled the void where exultation should have been

The fear came like a mist that steals over the fields beside a river-bank, cold and dank and white, smothering warmth, obliterating everything except itself, and I knew that if I did not crush it, it would take command so that they would only need to look at me to learn that I had killed him. So I gazed into the street and tried to lose myself in Carnival. Races of Africa they called themselves, the band that stretched from Frederick Street to the Savannah. Zulus, Fuzzy-wuzzys, Congolese, mysterious Arabs dressed in flowing white, and Negroes with leopard skin around their loins, pygmy women, Sudanese, and skinny natives from the Western Coast, tarbooshed Egyptians, Ethiopians with beards. Assegais and blowpipes, spears and daggers. Necklaces and charms and ju-jus by the score and savage rites and dances all along. And yet it seemed to me no more than an exhibition, and the chanting voices were without effect, my feet were still, and I thought that perhaps in the whole of Port of Spain I was the only one who stood outside of Carnival. There was nothing there in the street below to rid me of the fear which held me rigid, waiting for the feet outside the door, the shouts, the questions. The strength that should have come from malice was gone with my capacity to resurrect the chafing anger that had made me murder him, and I stood weak and silent knowing that my



*Terence Kelly*

fear would sentence me as I had sentenced him

I was the only silent one, and I could hear them jabbering as I heard the chanting of the band below, and nothing that they said touched me with interest until someone talked of him. This party's flat, where's Chris, some idiot said, and all at once the loathing overflowed and swept away in an instant the mists of fear and I knew that I could face the questioners because it needed only for them to use his name as they would always have to, to make the reasons for his killing ample. And I was right, for when the first of them came rushing in, his eyes aglow with the excitement of his news, I could listen with the rest of them with narrowed eyes and open mouth and I could make the same remarks. Who could it be, I don't believe it, only a madman would do such a thing. And I could race down those same stairs with them to view his corpse, cursing the gabbling, jabbering, gibbering crowd around him, leveraging my way through them as my right as partner gave me and kneeling at his side in the way they all expected.

He had ended on his face and there was an inch of knife, but I couldn't see his pipe amongst the feet around me.

The policemen came at last. I don't suppose now I come to think of it they would have come in from the front, but it doesn't matter any more than it matters that the Inspector was without puttees although he held a baton. They had no trouble

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keeping back the mob, there is a strange timidity that sets a proper distance from a body, but outside this perimeter the crowd swelled as the news was spread and the lift was going up and down until there were as many on the flight of stairs above as that below and Christopher Bingham Fairfax held his last court with his feet pointing to the sky and his head wedged between the landing and the bottom step and an inch of knife protruding from his back. He liked to be with people when he lived, but he had his largest audience now I think he would have liked it if he'd known

We went upstairs, the policemen and the manager and the Andersons and the rest of us, and they cordoned off the stairs and put a guard upon the lift, and the small ingredient of Carnival the murder had disturbed resumed its course We had to wait a little longer in the third-floor room but not for long, for all of us had been together at the time and one does not bite the hand that feeds one, and down below Carnival would be streaming in and out of the hotel foyer, trampling the clues and swallowing up his murderer. Later, when Carnival was dead, we'd have a longer talk to see if there was anything that would point towards the slayer of a man who had no enemies, meanwhile, the living lived, the bands were in the streets, the climax to the day had yet to come

I felt for them, struggling for the formula that would express a decent grief but would not pack

*Terence Kelly*

them off to bed. It must be difficult when your host is dead to carry on as if he were alive, but fortunately they had the air of Carnival to give them sustenance and then again I needed their support. There's nothing you can do, you know, you've got to carry on, they said. We'll stick with you and see it through. You can't stay moping in a hotel bedroom, and if you do we'll come and drag you out. There was a solemn rite drinking the health of the dear departed and then a bill to sign. I waved aside their feeble protestations. He was my partner, it's the least that I can do, they nodded sagely and we left together.

The Country Club is where you go to dine, to drink, to dance, at the end of Carnival. Of course it isn't dancing as you know it, it's jumping up, with or without a stick. I prefer a stick held between my palms and I like to close my eyes and let the music drown me, and best of all I like to be as close as I can to the band itself. I could stay on the same square yard of floor for the whole of the evening hearing the shuff shuff of the feet keeping time, feeling the points of the stick against my palms with the whole of my body moving to the beat. I never knew till jump-up that you can be like this, use every muscle of your body and yet be stationary, feel music taking hold of you until there is nothing but you and the beat and the sweat pouring down your face. Of course you can't stay there up against the band because

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that's what the others want to do, the men in their hot shirts and the women in their jeans and slacks and skirts and anything they thought to wear, they all want to be there because they feel the same as you. If you didn't know, if you came suddenly out of the cold of England into the heat of the night you'd hear the beat and you'd wonder what it was and then when you saw their faces and their little sticks and the way they moved without moving and the hot shirts on their backs you'd think it was the rum, but it isn't that at all. The rum or the whisky or the beer has nothing to do with it and it isn't even the music or the bands or the tropical night, it's simply Carnival in Trinidad and there isn't any other explanation. It doesn't matter that your host got murdered or you killed your partner, that sort of thing is just an incident once the jump-up has really taken hold of you, so after the first hour or so while the Country Club filled up and the bands warmed up, the Andersons and the others forgot him. But I did not. I didn't have to. I could stand there, swaying to the music, and feeling my heels lifting and my shoulders jiggling, and I could think about him and think what it would have been like if I hadn't killed him and he'd been there on the floor with his vast good nature and his perpetual smile, and I could think what it was like now to be alive and hot, listening to the beat and watching the people, instead of being stiff and dead and quite forgotten.

*Terence Kelly*

- But nothing goes on for ever, and Carnival ends at midnight and then everyone at the Country Club goes down to the swimming pool and people start jumping in with all their clothes on, or they get thrown in with all their clothes on, and the pool fills up like you never normally see it filled because no one wants to let go, and they hang on just like a child brings back a bucket of sand and a crab from his holidays, but even that has to come to an end and when it did there was Anderson ready to take me back. I don't know what had happened to his wife, perhaps they'd thrown her in the pool and she was somewhere wringing out her clothes and suddenly remembering that her Chris wasn't there any more to flirt with and to hang on to and feeling too ashamed to face me. Anyway, there was Anderson ready to take me back to my hotel because I didn't have a car, looking a little shamefaced himself and reminding me that it was too early to forget.

I was not surprised when he suggested that we had a nightcap in my room, it's the kind of thing which you can forecast, but what did surprise me was that there was a message that the Inspector would be coming back to see me. It wasn't that I was worried, I knew that there could be no evidence to link me with his death even if they had found the hilt, but I was surprised that he could not wait until the morning, but I suppose he had his reasons.

Anderson was very quiet as if he had used up

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all he had had to say at jump-up but I didn't fill it in. It was his idea to stay and all I wanted was to go to bed and work out what I had to do about the Trinidad office now that I hadn't got a partner to run it for me, that and think about killing Fairfax, in case it never felt as good again.

. Anderson got round to it at last. It wasn't much. At least, it wasn't much to him the way he looked at it. All he wanted to do was to talk about Fairfax, to give him an obituary, so that it all ended up nice and tidy and he could say to-morrow he had done his best for me.

Who would have murdered him, he asked. It must have been a madman or a drunk, Chris wasn't positive enough. I looked at him. Not positive enough? That's so, he said, he didn't have his enemies like most of us, because you see he had no depth. You must have known he had no depth. People like that are left in peace. Who is it that gets murdered? Politicians, millionaires and lovely women. People with depth of one sort or another. He hadn't any depth at all. You couldn't take him seriously. Why should you murder him? He smiled. I don't mean you. You least of all, but figuratively. He was like a bear, a clumsy bear. All that he had was written on his face. You chose ideally. You could have had a man we loathed so that we said we'll take our work elsewhere. You could have had a man to whom we all deferred, and lost your business any time he chose. But you

*Terence Kelly*

did better. You chose a figurehead, a simple man we had to like. A labourer. It's not disloyal to talk like this, he said, because Chris knew it. He knew what it was he had to do, to carry on where you had stopped. Of course, he had a complex and he had to prove he served a purpose. That was why he entertained the way he did. We understood, we thanked you privately but left it there. We let him feel he was our host because it was the best for him, for you, for us. He paused and there was silence and I saw the mist begin to curl again along the river-bank. Yes, he said, he was a simple man, and so they'll never find his murderer. You need a motive to do that.

What will you do, he asked. I don't know, not yet. It's far too sudden. But I knew. I'd run without a partner, take the profits, have that house myself.

You had the problem anyway, he said. I raised my head. How so? He lit a cigarette. He would have told you after Carnival. He was getting married. She was very rich. He could have had his house, gone back to England. Why should he stay. This was his farewell party.

He rose to leave. You don't look very well, he said, but then it's been a dreadful shock. There can't be any other man who would want him back alive again as much as you.

He left and the room was very silent. I walked over to the mirror and looked at what I saw and then I turned away and waited for the knock.

# *The Sound of the Singing*

MARGARET LAURENCE

THAT house in Manawaka is the one which, more than any other, I carry with me. Known to the rest of the town as 'the old Connor place' and to the family as the Brick House, it was plain as the winter turnips in its root cellar, sparsely windowed as some crusader's embattled fortress in a heathen wilderness, its rooms in a perpetual gloom except in the brief height of summer. Many other brick structures had existed in Manawaka for as much as half a century, but at the time when my grandfather built his house, part dwelling-place and part massive monument, it had been the first of its kind.

Set back at a decent distance from the street, it was screened by a line of spruce trees whose green-black branches swept down to the earth like the sternly protective wings of giant hawks. Spruce was not indigenous to that part of the prairies. Timothy Connor had brought the seedlings all the way from Galloping Mountain, a hundred miles north, not on whim, one may be sure, but feeling they were the trees for him. By the mid-thirties, the spruces were taller than the house, and two generations of children had clutched at boughs



*Margaret Laurence*

which were as rough and hornily knuckled as the hands of old farmers, and had swung themselves up to secret sanctuaries. On the lawn a few wild blue violets dared to grow, despite frequent beheadings from the clanking guillotine lawn-mower, and mauve-flowered creeping charley insinuated deceptively weak-looking tendrils up to the very edges of the flower-beds where helmeted snapdragon stood in precision.

We always went for Sunday dinner to the Brick House, the home of my mother's parents. This particular day my father had been called out to South Wachakwa, where someone had pneumonia, so only my mother and myself were flying down the sidewalk, hurrying to get there. My mother walked with short urgent steps, and I had to run to keep up, which I did not like having to do for I was ten that spring and needed my dignity.

'Dad said you shouldn't walk so fast because of the baby. I heard him.'

My father was a doctor, and, like many doctors, his advice to his own family was of an exceedingly casual nature. My mother's pre-natal care, apart from 'for pete's sake, honey, quit running around like a chicken with its head cut off', consisted mainly of admonitions to breathe deeply and drink plenty of water.

'Mercy,' my mother replied, 'I don't have to slow up yet, I should hope. Get a move on, Vanessa. It's nearly five, and we should've been

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there by now. I suppose Edna will have the dinner all ready, and there won't be a thing for me to do. I wish to heaven she wouldn't, but try to tell her. Anyway, you know how your grandfather hates people to be late.'

When we got close to the Brick House, my mother stopped hurrying, knowing that Grandfather would be watching from the bay window. She tidied my hair, which was fine and straight and tended to get in my eyes, and she smoothed down the collar of the white middie which I hated and resented having to wear to-day with my navy pleated skirt, as though it had still been winter.

'Your summer dresses are all up to your neck,' my mother had said, 'and we just can't manage a new one this year, but I'm certainly not going to have you going down there looking like a hooligan.'

Now that the pace of our walking had slowed, I began to hop along the sidewalk trying to touch the crooked lines where the cement had been frost-heaved, some winter or other, and never repaired. The ants made their homes here, and on each fissure a neat mound of earth appeared. I carefully tamped one down with my foot, until the ant castle was flattened to nothing. Then I hopped on, chanting

'Step on a crack, break your grandfather's back.'

'That's not very nice, Vanessa,' my mother said. 'Anyway, I always thought it was your mother's back.'

*Margaret Laurence*

'Well?' I said accusingly, hurt that she could imagine the substitution to have been accidental, for I had genuinely thought it would please her

'Try not to tear up and down stairs like you did last week,' my mother said anxiously 'You're too old for that kind of shenanigans'

Grandfather was standing on the front porch to greet us. He was a tall husky man, drum-chested, and once he had possessed great muscular strength. That simple power was gone now, but age had not stooped him. He walked straight as a boy — straighter than many, I have since thought, who never had to forge their own reasons for holding their heads high.

'Well, Beth, you're here,' Grandfather said 'Past five, ain't it?'

'It's only ten to,' my mother said defensively 'I hoped Ewen might be back — that's why I waited. He had to go out to South Wachakwa on a call.'

'You'd think a man could stay home on a Sunday,' Grandfather said.

'Good grief, Father,' my mother said, 'people get sick on Sundays the same as any other day.'

But she said it under her breath, so he did not hear her.

'Well, come in, come in,' he said 'No use standing around here all day. Go and say hello to your grandmother, Vanessa.'

Ample and waistless in her brown silk dress,

### *The Sound of the Singing*

Grandmother was sitting in the dining-room watching the canary. The bird had no name. She did not believe in bestowing names upon non-humans, for a name to her meant a christening, possible only for Christians. She called the canary 'Birdie', and maintained that this was not like a real name. It was swaying lightly on the bird-swing in its cage, its attentive eyes fixed upon her. She often sat here, quietly and apparently at ease, not feeling it necessary to be talking or doing, beside the window-sill with its row of African violets in old ginger jars that had been painted orange. She would try to coax the canary into its crystal trilling, but it was a surly creature and obliged only occasionally. She liked me to sit here with her, and sometimes I did, but I soon grew impatient and began squirming, until Grandmother would smile and say, 'All right, pet, you run along now,' and then I would be off like buckshot. When I asked my grandmother if the bird minded being there, she shook her head and said no, it had been there always and wouldn't know what to do with itself outside, and I thought this must surely be so, for it was a family saying that she couldn't tell a lie if her life depended on it.

'Hello, pet,' Grandmother said. 'Did you go to Sunday school?'

'Yes.'

'What did you learn?' Grandmother asked, not prying or demanding, but confidently, serenely.

*Margaret Laurence*

I was prepared, for the question was the same each week. I rarely listened in Sunday school, finding it more entertaining to compose in my head stories of spectacular heroism, in which I figured as central character, so I never knew what the text had been. But I had read large portions of the Bible by myself, for I was constantly hard-up for reading material, so I had no trouble in providing myself with a verse each week before setting out for the Brick House. My lines were generally of a warlike nature, for I did not favour the meek stories and I had no use at all for the begats.

*'How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle,'* I replied instantly. •

'Second Samuel,' Grandmother said, nodding her head. 'That's very nice, dear.'

I was not astonished that my grandmother thought the bloody death of Jonathan was very nice, for this was her unvarying response, whatever the verse. And in fact it was not strange, for to her everything in the Bible was as gentle as she herself. The swords were spiritual only, strokes of lightness and dark, and the wounds poured cochineal.

Grandfather tramped into the dining-room. His hair was yellowish white, but once it had been as black as my own, and his brown, beaked, leathery face was still handsome.

'You'd best come into the living-room, Agnes,'

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he said 'No use waiting here Beth says Ewen's gone away out to South Wachakwa It'll be a wonder if we get our dinner at all to-night '

Grandmother rose 'Yes, I was just coming in '

Grandfather walked over to the window and peered at the plants on the sill

'Them jars could do with a coat of paint,' he said. 'I've got some enamel left in the basement It's that bottle-green I used on the tool-shed '

'Is there no orange left ?' Grandmother inquired

'No It's all used up What's the matter with bottle-green ?'

'Oh, nothing's the matter with it, I guess I just wondered, that's all '

'I'll do them first thing to-morrow, then,' Grandfather said decisively

No tasks could be undertaken to-day, but there was no rule against making plans for Monday, so my grandfather invariably spent the Sabbath in this manner. Thwarted, but making the best of a bad lot, he lumbered around the house like some great wakeful bear waiting for the enforced hibernation of Sunday to be over. He stopped at the hall door now and rattled it, running hard expert fingers along the brass hinges

'Hinge is loose,' he said 'The pin's worn I'll have to go down to the store and see if they've got one. That Barnes probably won't have the right size — he's got no notion of stock. Maybe I've got an extra one in the basement. Yes, I have

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'An idea there's one there I'll just step down and have a look '

I heard him clumping down the basement steps, and soon from the area of his work-bench there arose the soft metallic jangle of nails and bolts and collected oddments being sifted through I glanced at my grandmother, but if she was relieved that he was rummaging down there, she gave no sign

I did not know then the real torment that the day of rest was for him, so I had no patience with his impatience What I did know, however, was that if he had been any other way he would not have passed muster in Manawaka. He was widely acknowledged as an upright man It would have been a disgrace if he had been known by the opposite word, which was 'downright' A few of my friends had downright grandfathers. They were a deep mortification to their families, these untidy old men who sat on the Bank of Montreal steps in the summer-time and spat amber tobacco jets on to the dusty sidewalk They were described as 'downright worthless' or 'downright lazy', the two terms being synonymous. These shadows of wastrels, these flimsy remnants of past profligates, with their dry laughter like the cackle of crows or the crackling of fallen leaves underfoot, embarrassed me terribly, although I did not have any idea why Walking down main street I would avoid looking at them, feeling somehow that they should not be on view, that they should be hidden away in an

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attic along with the other relics too common to be called antiques and too broken to be of any further use. Yet I was inexplicably drawn to them, too, sensing some impious and half-beckoning mockery in them, some kinship as yet unexplored.

With Grandfather safely occupied, one danger for me was temporarily over, for if he could think of nothing else to do, he would sit me down on a footstool beside his chair and make me listen, fidgeting with boredom, while he talked of the past. To me there was nothing at all remarkable in the fact that he had come out west by stern-wheeler and had walked the hundred-odd miles from Winnipeg to Manawaka with hardly a cent in his pocket. Unfortunately, he had not met up with any slit-eyed and treacherous Indians or any mad trappers, but only with ordinary farmers who had given him work shoeing their horses, for he was a blacksmith. He had been the first blacksmith in Manawaka, and finally had saved enough money to set himself up in the hardware business. He frequently related the epic of that significant day.

'I mind well the day I sold out the smithy to Bill Saunders. He was my helper in them days. He died of a growth only last year, and no wonder. He was always a great man for eating fried stuff. I used to tell him it coats the inside of your stomach, but he never paid heed. Well, I'd rented the store space in the old Carmichael block, and I says to Billy, "I'm going into hardware and if you want



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the smithy, she's yours for five hundred on the anvil" He laid down his money, just like that I picked it up and walked out and I never shod another horse from that day to this It was hard going in them days, to make the store pay, but I used to load up the buckboard with kettles and axes and that, and take it all around the countryside, and I done a sight better than I would've if I'd sat at home like some fellows I could mention, just waiting for the business to come to me '

I had been trained in both politeness and prudence, so I always said 'Gee', in an impressed voice, but it did not seem very exciting to me I could not imagine the store looking any other way than it did now, a drab place full of kitchen utensils and saw blades and garden tools and kegs of nails It was not even Connor's Hardware any longer, for Grandfather had sold it a few months ago and had officially retired He still felt as though he were in the business, however, and would often go down to the store and give good advice to Mr Barnes, the present owner Once he took me down with him, and I pretended to be studying the paint charts while Grandfather held forth and Mr Barnes kept saying, 'Well, well, that's a thought all right, yessiree, I'll have to think about that, Mr Connor.' Finally Grandfather went stomping home and said to Grandmother, 'The man's a downright fool, and lazy as a pet pig, I'll tell you that much,' and my grandmother chirped softly to my aunt, 'Edna,

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make your father a nice cup of tea, will you, pet?

Aunt Edna and my mother were talking in the kitchen now, so I went out. My mother was the eldest in the family of five, and Aunt Edna was the youngest, and while both had the Connor black hair and blue eyes, they were not alike in appearance. My mother was slight and fine-boned, with long-fingered hands like those on my Chinese princess doll, and feet that Aunt Edna enviously called 'aristocratic', which meant narrow. 'It's a poor family that can't afford one lady,' my mother would reply ironically, for we all knew she worked as hard as anyone. Aunt Edna, on the other hand, was handsome and strong, but did not like being so. She said she had feet like scows, and she was constantly asking if we thought she had put on weight. My mother, torn between honesty and affection, would reply, 'Not so anyone would really notice'.

I climbed up on the high kitchen-stool, as unobtrusively as possible. I was a professional listener. I had long ago discovered it was folly to try to conceal oneself. The best concealment was to sit quietly in plain view.

'He's always been so active,' my mother was saying. 'It's understandable, Edna.'

'It's all right for you,' my aunt said. 'Ken Barnes doesn't phone you to complain.'

'I know,' my mother said.

She leaned against the kitchen-cabinet, and all at once I saw the intricate lines of tiredness in her

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face. Perhaps they had been there all along,' but I had never before noticed them. The sight frightened me, for I still needed the conviction that no one except myself ever suffered anything. Aunt Edna, too, was scrutinizing her.

'You'll have to go into smocks soon, Beth. I thought I'd run up a few for you on the machine. I've got that rose crêpe — I never wear it here. The colour would suit you.'

'What? Do sewing, with this house to run? You haven't the time, Edna. Don't be silly.'

My mother disliked rose intensely, but Aunt Edna had forgotten. The dress had been my aunt's best one, which she had bought when she went to Winnipeg a few years before, to take a commercial course.

'I've got nothing to do with my evenings,' Aunt Edna said. 'I can't just sit around and twiddle my thumbs, can I? It's settled, then. I'll get at it next week.'

'Well, thanks,' my mother said. 'It's very good of you. What are we going to do about the other, Edna?'

'What can we do? I'm certainly not tackling him about it, are you?'

'Hardly. My, what a pity he ever sold the place. Maybe it was getting too much for him, but still——'

'I was against it, but you know what he's like when his mind's made up. He said a man of his

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age bought to be able to afford to retire. He thought he'd been in hardware long enough.' Then Aunt Edna laughed. 'Hardware — that was certainly the right thing for him to go into, wasn't it?' Can you imagine him in software or — heaven forbid — perishables?'

• 'Is there such a thing as software?' my mother asked.

'Not in his language, kiddo,' Aunt Edna said.

Then they both giggled, and I, all at once wanting to be included, dropped my camouflage of silence.

'Why does Grandfather always say "I seen" and "I done"? Doesn't he know?'

Aunt Edna laughed again, but my mother did not.

'Because he never had your advantages, young lady, that's why,' she said crossly. 'He had to leave school when he was just a child. Don't you ever mention it to him, either, do you hear? At least he doesn't say "guy", like some people I could name.'

'Haw haw,' I said sarcastically, but I said it very quietly so she did not hear.

'Nessa,' Aunt Edna said, 'where's that clothes-peg doll you were making?'

I had forgotten it. I got it out now and decided I would be able to finish it to-day. Everyone else in Manawaka used the metal-spring type of clothes-pegs, but my grandmother still stuck to the all-wooden ones with a round knob on top and two straight legs. They were perfect for making dolls,

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and I used a pipe-cleaner for the arms and bits of coloured crêpe paper for the clothes. This one was going to be an old-fashioned lady.

'You know, Beth,' Aunt Edna said, 'that's not right about advantages. He had plenty. Anyone could make a go of it in those days, if they were willing to work.'

'Oh, I suppose so,' my mother said. Her voice sounded peculiar, as though she were ashamed that she had brought the subject up. She turned away and bent her dark head over the big woodstove that said *McClary's Range* in shining script across the warming oven at the top. She poked at the bubbling cauliflower with a fork.

'I'll bet a nickel Ewen won't be back in time for dinner. It's Henry Pearl, and I guess he's in a pretty bad way, poor old fellow. He wouldn't come in to hospital. He said he wants to die on his own place. Ewen won't get a cent, of course, but let's hope they pay in chickens this time, not that awful pork again, just loaded with fat.'

'Why don't you ask me if I've had any word?' Aunt Edna said coldly. 'Since that's what you're wondering.'

'Well, have you?'

'No. The ad's been in the Winnipeg papers for the full two weeks now. Tell Ewen thanks but I'm afraid the money was wasted.'

'If you think it would be any use to run it again, maybe we could——'

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'No,' my aunt said 'I'm not borrowing any more from Ewen. The two of you have enough to worry about.'

'Well, maybe Winnipeg's not the right place to try. Maybe you'd have a better chance right here in Manawaka.'

'Oh Lord, Beth, don't you think I've gone to every office in town? They've all got stenographers already, for pity's sake, or else they can't afford to hire one. Won't this damn depression ever be over? I can see myself staying on and on here in this house—'

I had put too much mucilage on the crêpe paper, and the pieces of the lady's skirt were slithering and refused to stick properly on the doll. Then half the skirt got stuck on my hand, and when I angrily yanked it away, the paper tore.

'Darn it! Darn this darned old thing!'

'What's the matter?' my mother asked.

'It won't stick, and now it's ripped. See? Now I'll have to cut out another skirt.'

I grabbed the scissors and began hacking at another piece of paper.

'Well, as your grandmother says, there's no use getting in a fantod about it,' my mother said. 'Why don't you leave it now and go back to it when you're not so worked up?'

'No. I want to finish it to-day, and I'm going to.'

It had become, somehow, overwhelmingly important for me to finish it. I did not even play

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With dolls very much, but this one was the beginning of a collection I had planned. I could visualize them, each dressed elaborately in the costume of some historical period or some distant country, ladies in hoop skirts, gents in black top-hats, Highlanders in kilts, hula girls with necklaces of paper flowers. But this one did not look at all as I had imagined she would. Her wooden face, on which I had already pencilled eyes and mouth, grinned stupidly at me, and I leered viciously back. *You'll be beautiful whether you like it or not*, I told her.

Aunt Edna hardly appeared to have noticed the interruption, but my mother had her eyes fixed dubiously on me, and I wished I had kept quiet.

'You know what he said yesterday?' Aunt Edna went on. 'He told me I was almost as good as Jenny — she was their last hired girl, remember? Not as good, mark you. Almost.'

'You mustn't be so touchy,' my mother said. 'He meant it as a compliment.'

'I know,' Aunt Edna said in a strained voice. 'That's the hilarious part. Oh, Beth——'

'Nessa, honey,' my mother said hastily, 'run in and see if Grandmother wants to wait dinner for Daddy or not, will you?'

Humiliated and furious, I climbed down from the stool. She reached out to ruffle my hair in an apologetic gesture, but I brushed away her hand and walked into the living-room, wrapped in my cloak of sullen haughtiness.

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Grandfather was walking up and down in front of the bay window, first looking out and then consulting his pocket watch. He stared at me, and I hesitated. His eyes were the same Irish blue we all had, but the song *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling* had certainly not been referring to him.

‘Where’s your father got to, Vanessa?’ he said. ‘He better get a move on.’

Exhilarated with an accumulation of anger, I looked for something offensive to say.

‘It’s not his fault,’ I replied hotly. ‘It’s Mr Pearl. He’s dying with pneumonia. I’ll bet you he’s spitting up blood this very second.’

Did people spit blood with pneumonia? All at once, I could not swallow, feeling as though that gushing crimson were constricting my own throat. Something like that would go well in the story I was currently making up. *Sick to death in the freezing log cabin, with only the beautiful half-breed lady (no, woman) to look after him, old Jebb suddenly clutched his throat* — and so on.

‘You mind how you talk,’ Grandfather was saying severely. ‘Do you want to upset your grandmother?’

This was a telling blow. I did not want to upset my grandmother. It was tacitly understood among all members of the family that Grandmother was not to be upset. Only Grandfather was allowed to upset her. The rest of us coddled her gladly, assuming she needed protection. I looked guiltily



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at her now, but she appeared unaware that anything nasty had been spoken. If it had been a week-day, she would have been knitting an afghan, but as it was Sunday she was reading the Bible with the aid of a magnifying glass. She did not believe in eye-glasses, which were, she thought, unnatural. She did not believe in smoking or drinking or the playing of cards, either, but she never pushed her beliefs at other people nor made any claims for her own goodness. If a visitor lit up a cigarette, she did not say a word, not even after he had gone. This was not a question of piety to her, but of manners. She kept one ash-tray in the house, for the use of smoking guests. It was a thick glass one, and it said in gilt letters *Queen Victoria Hotel, Manawaka*. Uncle Terence, the second oldest of her children, had swiped it once out of the hotel beer parlour, but Grandmother never knew that, and was always under the impression that the management had given it to him for some reason or other, possibly because he must have been such a polite and considerate dining-room guest, which was the only part of the hotel she thought he had ever been into.

My grandmother was a Mitigated Baptist. I knew this because I had heard my father say, 'At least she's not an unmitigated Baptist,' and when I inquired, he told me that if you were Unmitigated you believed in Total Immersion, which meant that when you were baptized you had to be

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dunked in the Wachakwa river with all your clothes on Unlike the United Church, where I went with my parents and where the baptisms were usually new-born babies and the event happened only once for each person, in my grandmother's church the ritual was often performed with adults and could occur seasonally, if the call came, a kind of refresher course in salvation. Grandmother had never plunged into the muddy Wachakwa

'With her tendency to pleurisy,' my father had said, 'we can count it a singular blessing that your grandmother believes in font baptism'

Grandfather had started out a Methodist, but when the Methodists joined with the Presbyterians to form the United Church, he had refused to go because he did not like all the Scots who were now in the congregation He had therefore turned Baptist and now went to Grandmother's church

'It's a wonder he didn't join the Salvation Army,' I had once heard Aunt Edna remark, 'rather than follow her lead.'

'Now, Edna,' my mother had said, glancing sideways at me So I heard nothing more of any interest that day, but I did not really care, for I was planning in my head a story in which an infant was baptized by Total Immersion and swept away by the river which happened to be flooding. (Why would it be flooding? Well, probably the spring ice was just melting Would they do baptisms at that time of year? The water would be

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awfully cold Obviously, some details needed to be worked out here ) The child was dressed in a christening robe of white lace, and the last the mother saw of her was a scrap of white being swirled away towards the Deep Hole near the Wachakwa bend, where there were blood-suckers

Grandfather did not believe, either, in smoking, drinking, card-playing, dancing, tobacco-chewing or spitting But unlike my grandmother, he did not permit any of these things in his presence. If someone coming to the Brick House for the first time chanced to light a cigarette when Grandfather was home, he gave them one chance and that was all His warning was straightforward He would walk to the front door, fling it open, and begin coughing He would then say, 'Smoky in here, ain't it ?' If this had no effect, he told the visitor to get out, and no two ways about it Aunt Edna once asked me to guess how many boy-friends she had lost that way, and when I said, 'I give up — how many ?', she said, 'Five, and that's the gospel truth' At the time I imagined, because she was laughing, that she thought it was funny

Grandfather had stopped his pacing now, and stood squarely in front of Grandmother's chair

'Agnes, go and tell them girls to serve up the dinner now. We can't wait around all night'

'Will you go, pet ?' Grandmother said to me. 'Your feet are younger than mine.'

When I conveyed the message, Aunt Edna stood

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in the kitchen doorway and bellowed loud enough for a person to hear in South Wachakwa

‘Tell him the cauliflower isn’t done yet!’

‘Edna!’ my mother hissed. Then she began laughing, and put her handkerchief over her face. I was laughing, too, until I looked again and saw that my mother was now crying, in jerky uncertain breaths like a person takes when they first go outside in forty-below weather.

‘Beth——’ Swiftly, Aunt Edna had closed the kitchen door.

‘I’m sorry,’ my mother said. ‘What an idiot. There — I’m fine now.’

‘Come on — we’ll go up to my room and have a cigarette. Glory!’ What are we going to do when the “Attar of Roses” is all gone?’

The ‘Attar of Roses’ was a decidedly strong-smelling perfume that had been given to Aunt Edna by one of her boy-friends in Winnipeg. It was in an atomizer, and she used to squirt it around her bedroom after she had finished a cigarette. On these occasions, my mother always said, ‘Do you think we are teaching the child deception?’ And Aunt Edna always replied, ‘No, just self-preservation.’

I went up the back-stairs with them. Aunt Edna’s room had a white vanity table with thin legs and a mirror that could be turned this way and that. Beside the mirror sat a dresser doll that had been given to Aunt Edna by another admirer.

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'An old boy-friend,' she had told me, and now that I was ten I understood that this did not refer to his age but to the fact that they were irrevocably parted, he being in the city and she in Manawaka. The doll had a china head and body, set on a wire hoop-skirt frame that was covered with fluted apricot *crêpe de Chine*. Her high coiffure was fashioned of yellow curls, real hair cut from a real person's head. 'Probably somebody that died of typhoid,' Aunt Edna had said. 'Well, *toujours gai*, kid, but I wish he had sent chocolates instead.' Aunt Edna's room also had a blue silk eiderdown stuffed with duck feathers, a Japanese lacquer box with a picture of a chalk-faced oriental lady holding a fan, a camphor ice in a tubular wooden case with a bulb head painted like a clown, a green leather jewellery case full of beads and ear-rings and a floppy pyjama-bag doll embroidered with mysterious words such as *Immy-Jay* and *Oy-Ray* which I, like Grandmother, had believed were either meaningless or else Chinese, until I became acquainted with Pig Latin.

My mother sat down on the bed and Aunt Edna sat at the vanity table and began combing her hair. The smoke from their cigarettes made blue whorls in the air.

'Honey, what is it?' Aunt Edna asked in a worried voice.

'It's nothing,' my mother said. 'I'm not myself these days.'

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'You look worn out,' Aunt Edna said 'Caff't you quit the office? You'll have to, soon, anyway'

'I want to keep on as long as I can Ewen can't afford to hire a nurse, Edna, you know that'

'Well, at least you needn't do your spring house-cleaning this year Beating your carpet like you were doing last week — you're out of your head, Beth'

'The house is a disgrace,' my mother said in a small voice 'I just want to get the rugs and curtains done, and the cupboards, that's all I don't intend to do another thing'

'I'll bet,' Aunt Edna said

'Well, what about you?' my mother asked 'Don't think I didn't notice you'd done the pantry cupboards this week This house is far too much for you, Edna.'

'Mother ran it, all those years'

'She had us to help, don't forget And she was hardly ever without a hired girl'

'The least I can do is earn my room and board,' Aunt Edna said. 'I'm not going to have him saying—'

She broke off. My mother got up and put an arm around Aunt Edna's shoulder.

'There now, love It's all right. It's going to be all right'

The phone rang, and I ran down to answer it, feeling some unaccustomed obligation. Their sadness was such a new thing, not to my actual sight

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but to my attention, that I felt it as a bodily hurt, like skinning a knee, a sharp stinging pain. But I felt as well an obscure sense of loss. Some comfort had been taken from me, but I did not know what it was.

'Hello.' It was Central's voice. She had a name, but no one in Manawaka ever called her anything except Central. 'Is that you, Vanessa? Your dad's calling from South Wachakwa.'

I heard a buzzing, and then my father's voice. 'Vanessa? Listen, sweetheart, tell your mother I won't be home for awhile yet. I'll have dinner here. And tell her she's to go home early and get to bed. How is she?'

'She's okay.' But I was immediately alert. 'Why? What was the matter with her?'

'Nothing. But you be sure to tell her, eh?'

I ran upstairs and repeated what he had said. Aunt Edna looked at my mother oddly.

'Beth——'

'It wasn't anything,' my mother said quickly. 'Only the merest speck. You know how Ewen fusses.'

'No, he doesn't,' Aunt Edna said. 'You tell me the truth this minute, Beth.'

My mother's voice was slow and without expression.

'All right, then. It was a pretty near thing, I suppose. It happened on Tuesday, after I'd been doing the rugs. That's why I didn't want to tell

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you You don't need to say it was my own fault  
I know it But I'd been feeling perfectly well,  
Edna Really I had '

She looked up at Aunt Edna, and there was something in her eyes I had not seen before, some mute appeal

. 'If I'd lost it, I'd never have forgiven myself I didn't do it on purpose, Edna '

'You don't have to tell me that,' Aunt Edna cried 'Don't you think I know?'

And then, strangely, while I sat on the cedar chest and watched, only partially knowing and yet bound somehow to them, they hugged each other tightly and I saw the tears on both their faces although they were not making a sound

'Mercy,' my mother said at last, 'my nose is shining like a beacon — where's your powder?'

When my mother had gone down to start serving the dinner, Aunt Edna put away the ash-trays and began spraying 'Attar of Roses' around the room

'How's the poetry?' she asked.

I was not shy about replying, for I loved to talk about myself 'I'm not doing any right now I'm writing a story I've filled two scribblers already'

'Oh?' Aunt Edna sounded impressed. 'What are you calling it?'

'The Pillars of the Nation,' I replied. 'It's about pioneers.'

'You mean — people like Grandfather?'



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‘My gosh,’ I said, startled ‘Was he a pioneer?’

Then I felt awkward and at a distance from her, for she began to laugh hoarsely

‘I’ll tell the cock-eyed world,’ she said ‘Seeing I was offended, she cut off her laughter ‘When do you work at it, Nessa?’

‘After school, mostly But sometimes at night.’

‘Does your mother let you keep your light on?’

I looked at her doubtfully, not sure how far she could be trusted. ‘If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell?’

‘Cross my heart,’ she said, ‘and hope to die’

‘I don’t keep my light on. I use my flashlight’

‘Mercy, what devotion Do you write some every day?’

‘Yes, every day,’ I said proudly

‘Couldn’t you spin it out? Make it last longer?’

‘I want to get it finished’

‘Why? What’s the rush?’

I was beginning to feel restless and suspicious. ‘I don’t know I just want to get it done I like doing it’

Aunt Edna put the perfume atomizer back on the vanity table

‘Sure, I know,’ she said. ‘But what if you ever wanted to stop, for a change?’

As we were going down the back-stairs, we heard the front door open, and Grandfather’s voice saying, ‘Well now, well now—’ and then another voice. Aunt Edna gasped

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'Don't tell me' Oh heavenly days, it is Uncle Dan Now all I need is somebody from the government coming and telling me I owe income tax'

'I thought you liked Uncle Dan,' I said curiously

'I do,' Aunt Edna said, 'but it's not a question of whether you like a person or not'

We emerged into the kitchen My mother had stopped carving the pork and was standing with the silver knife in her hand, motionless

'He's certainly had a few, judging from his voice,' she said 'Why on earth does he do it? He knows perfectly well how much it upsets Mother.'

'One of these days Father is going to tell him to get out,' Aunt Edna said 'But I'd kind of hate to see that happen, wouldn't you?'

'He'll never do that Blood is thicker than water, as you may have heard Father mention a million times'

'That's not why he lets him come around,' Aunt Edna said. 'Seeing Uncle Dan reminds him how well he's done himself, that's all. Lord, I must stop this — I'm getting meaner every day.'

'Well, I suppose we'd better go and say hello to the old fraud,' my mother said 'He can have Ewen's place at the table.'

Uncle Dan was Grandfather's brother, but he was not upright. He had a farm in the South Wachakwa valley, but he never planted any crops. He raised horses, and spent most of his time travel-

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ling around the country, selling them. At least, he was supposed to be selling them, but Aunt Edna said he had horse-trading in his blood and couldn't resist swapping, so he usually came back to Manawaka with the same number of horses he had started out with, only they were different horses, and no money. He had never married. I liked him because he always carried brown, hot-tasting humbugs in his pockets, usually covered with navy fluff from his coat, and he sang Irish songs. I liked him only when none of my friends were around to see, however. In the presence of the other kids, he embarrassed me. He was older than Grandfather, and he did not keep himself very clean. His serge trousers were polka-dotted with spilled food, and when his nose ran he wiped it with a sweeping motion of his claw hand. He never cleaned his finger-nails, although sometimes he brought out his jack-knife and pared them, dropping the shavings on Grandmother's polished hardwood floor and causing her to utter the only phrase of protest she knew — 'Now Dan, now Dan—.' Sometimes when I was down-town with him he walked and talked waveringly, and bought an Eskimo Pie for me and a packet of Sen-Sen for himself, and I was not meant to know why, but naturally I did, having among my friends several whose fathers or uncles were said to be downright no-good. In Manawaka, no-good meant only one thing.

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Uncle Dan was smaller than Grandfather, but his eyes were the same blue. They bore a vastly different expression, however. Uncle Dan's eyes hardly ever stopped laughing. There was laughter in his voice as well, a laughter he himself throve upon, with none of the anger or sadness I felt in Aunt Edna's laughter or my mother's.

'Well, Dan, you're back,' Grandfather said.

'I'm back, I'm back,' Uncle Dan carolled. 'Just got the niftiest black two-year-old you ever seen. Got him from old Burnside, over at Freehold. Swapped him that grey gelding of mine.'

'No cash, I'll wager,' Grandfather said.

'Well, now, Timothy, how've you been?' Uncle Dan cried, cannily changing the subject. 'You're looking dandy.'

'I'm well enough,' Grandfather said. 'Mind-ing my own business. I sold the store, Dan.'

'Yeh, you done that before I went away. Taking life easy, eh?'

Under her breath, Aunt Edna said, 'Red rag to a bull—' and my mother said 'Shush.'

'I keep busy,' Grandfather said furiously. 'Plenty to do around here, you know. Got two loads of poplar last week, and I'm splitting them for kindling. A man's got to keep busy. I got no use for them fellows who just sit around.'

'Well, well, you'll have the biggest woodpile in Manawaka, I wouldn't doubt it for a second,' Uncle Dan said in gay malice. 'By jummy, here's Vanessa

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You've grown, macushla, and so you have, to be sure '

'Oh Glory,' said Aunt Edna, in a low voice  
'Macushla, indeed '

'And Beth and Edna—' Uncle Dan cried 'By the lord Harry, girls, you're getting more beautiful with each passing day!'

My mother, stifling a laugh, held out a hand  
'Good to see you, Uncle Dan We're just going to have dinner Do you want to go up and wash?'

'In a minute Where's Agnes?'

Grandmother had not come out into the front hall She still sat in the living-room The Book was on her knee, but she was not reading Uncle Dan swept her an unsteady bow

'Hello, Dan,' she said Then, apparently without effort, as though she refused to set bounds to her courtesy 'It's nice to have you with us '

Uncle Dan's eyes stopped smiling and grew moist with self-sorrow. 'Ah, no, it's you that's the nice one, to be sure, opening the door to an old man '

His voice quavered, he looked as though he might faint with sheer fragility.

'If he goes on like that,' Aunt Edna whispered angrily, but unable to suppress a small belch of acid mirth, 'I'm walking out, so help me '

'He'll be all right once he's had some food,' my mother said

Dinner was very entertaining, with Uncle Dan tucking his serviette in at his chin, and spilling

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gravy on the clean damask cloth, and burping openly and then saying, 'Par'n me, as the fella says' He told jokes of the kind I was not supposed to understand and which in fact I did not understand but always pretended I had, by rude guffaws for which I was reproached Grandfather kept saying, 'Mind your language, Dan,' or 'Mind your elbow — that water tumbler's going over — there, what did I tell you?' My mother and Aunt Edna kept their heads down and ate hurriedly After dinner, Grandfather and Uncle Dan settled down side by side on the chesterfield, while Grandmother sat in her golden-oak armchair Uncle Dan drew out his pipe and the oilcloth roll of tobacco Aunt Edna, gathering up the dishes, glanced into the living-room and began muttering

'That damn pipe of his. It reeks to high heaven'

'Grandfather never lets anyone else smoke,' I said, 'so why Uncle Dan?'

'Don't ask me,' Aunt Edna shrugged 'It's one of life's mysteries Maybe it's his present to Uncle Dan — the booby prize.'

I went into the living-room to wait until the dishes were stacked and ready to begin drying. Grandfather and Uncle Dan were chatting, after their fashion.

'We're neither of us as young as we used to be, Dan,' said Grandfather, who specialized in clear but gloomy statements of this kind

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'Oh, I wouldn't say that,' Uncle Dan replied, sucking at his pipe and sending up gray clouds like smoke signals 'I feel pretty near as good as ever '

'You don't look it,' Grandfather said

'What's that ?'

'I said you don't look it You're getting hard of hearing, Dan '

Uncle Dan puffed silently for a moment Then, with deliberation, he removed the pipe from between his yellowed teeth and held it in his hands, stroking the briar bowl

'Well, sir, maybe you're right, at that,' he said reflectively. 'I used to be able to hear a fly when he walked up the wall, but now I can only hear him when he rustles his wings '

I snickered, and Uncle Dan looked down at the footstool where I was perched.

'There's my girl,' he said 'What about a song, to while the happy hours away ?'

Not waiting for my agreement, he struck up at once, in a reedy old-man's voice, sometimes going off key, but sprightly none the less, tapping out the rhythm with one foot

'With the tootle of the flute and the twiddle of the fiddle,  
A-twirl'n' in the middle like a herring on the griddle,  
Up, down, hands around, crossing to the wall,  
Oh, hadn't we the gaiety at Phil the Fluter's Ball !'

I clapped, feeling traitorous, not daring to look at either of my grandparents. Uncle Dan, encouraged,

### *The Sound of the Singing*

sang *MacNamara's Band*, in which he always put himself instead of MacNamara

'Oh, me name is Danny Connor, I'm the leader of the band, Although we're few in number, we're the finest in the land —'

He sang it very Irish, saying 'foinest', and when he got to the line 'And when we play at funerals we play the best of all,' he winked at me and I winked back

'Sing with me,' he said, before the next song, but I shook my head I could never sing in front of anybody, for I always thought I might sound foolish, and I could not bear to be laughed at

Uncle Dan kept right on, and now he was really enjoying himself He sang *Nell Flaherty's Drake* with great vigour, especially the part about the curse that's laid on the person who stole and ate the bird.

'May his pig never grunt,  
May his cat never hunt,  
May a ghost ever haunt him at dead of the night,  
May his hens never lay,  
May his horse never neigh,  
May his goat fly away like an old paper kite —'

All at once Grandfather slapped his hand down hard on the arm of the chesterfield, making it wheeze.

'That's enough, now,' he said

Uncle Dan continued his singing

'Enough!' Grandfather shouted. 'Are you stone deaf, man?'



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Uncle Dan stopped, looking perplexed.

'What's the trouble?'

'Sunday wouldn't make no difference to you,' Grandfather said, 'but you needn't forget where you are'

'Well, now, Timothy,' Uncle Dan said, 'you needn't be like that about it'

'I'll be any way I please, in my own house,' Grandfather said

I judged this to be the right moment for me to go to the kitchen and help with the dishes. Now the two old men would sit and argue, and Grandmother would have to listen to the thing that distressed her more than anything in this world — a scene, a disagreement in the family. I knew quite well what would happen. Grandmother would remain as outwardly placid as ever, but later in the evening she would go out to the kitchen and call Aunt Edna and say, 'I wonder if you would have an aspirin handy, pet? I've a little headache.' When she had gone back to the living-room, Aunt Edna would say to no one in particular, 'She's been sitting there for hours with a splitting head, I don't doubt.' And then, if I was in luck, my aunt would turn to me and say, 'C'mon, kiddo, let's drown our sorrows — what do you say to some fudge?'

The dishes had been started. Aunt Edna handed me a tea-towel.

'Let's not break our necks over them, eh?' she

### *The Sound of the Singing*

said, and I knew she wanted to dawdle so she would not have to go back into the living-room. But we did not dawdle, for my mother was a fast washer and we had to keep up with her.

‘Was Uncle Dan born in Ireland?’ I asked conversationally.

My mother and Aunt Edna both laughed.

‘Mercy, no,’ Aunt Edna said. ‘The closest he ever got to Ireland was the vaudeville shows at the old Roxy — it burned down before you were born. He was born in Ontario, just like Grandfather. The way Uncle Dan talks isn’t Irish — it’s stage Irish. He’s got it all down pat. Macushla. Begorra. He even sings rebel songs, and he a Protestant. It makes no earthly difference to him. He’s phoney as a three-dollar bill. I really wonder why I like him so much.’

‘You always told me I was half Irish,’ I said reproachfully to my mother.

‘Well, you are,’ she replied. ‘You’re Scottish on your father’s side. You take after the MacLeods as much as the Connors, or more so. You’re reflective, like your father. And in looks, you’ve got your Grandpa MacLeod’s hands and ears—’

She looked at me, as though to make certain that these borrowed appendages were still there. The idea of inherited characteristics had always seemed odd to me, and when I was younger, I had thought that my Grandpa MacLeod, who died a year after I was born, must have spent the last

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twelve months of his life deaf and handless

'You're Irish on my side,' my mother continued  
'Your grandfather's parents were born there Do you remember Grandma Connor, Edna? She lived with us for the last few years before she died'

'Only vaguely,' Aunt Edna said 'What was she like?'

'Oh, let's see — she was a tiny little woman with a face like a falcon, as I recall, kind of fiercely handsome Father looks quite a bit like her. She used to go out each year to the Orangemen's parade, and stand there on Main, cheering and bawling her eyes out'

'My Lord,' Aunt Edna said 'What did Father think of that?'

'He was mortified,' my mother said. 'Wouldn't you be? There was this small ferocious old lady, making a regular spectacle of herself She always wore a tight lace cap on her head She didn't have any hair.'

'What?' Aunt Edna and I cried at the same time, delighted and horrified.

My mother nodded. 'It's quite true She'd had some sickness and all her hair fell out. She was bald as a peeled onion'

We were still laughing when we heard the shouting from the living-room. I found it hard to switch mood suddenly, and could not take the raised voices seriously. Tittering, I nudged my mother, wanting the shared hilarity to continue

### *The Sound of the Singing*

She did not respond, and when I looked up at her, I saw her face was rigid and apprehensive. The joke was over as though it had never been. My mother and my aunt went reluctantly into the living-room, and I followed.

'What beats me,' Grandfather was saying, 'is how you'd have the nerve to ask. Easy come, easy go — that's what you think. It never come easy to me, and it's not going easy, neither!'

'Steady, Timothy,' Uncle Dan said, as though he were speaking to a horse that had turned mean.

'Steady, nothing. You think because I sold the store that I've got a fortune stowed away. Well, I've not. And what I've got, I'm hanging on to. The taxes on this house alone — it don't bear thinking about. Who's to look after things, if I don't? Here's Edna, keeps claiming she can't get work. And Beth and Ewen, having another baby they've got no business to be having if Ewen can't even get people to pay their doctor bills. I'd make them pay up, I'll tell the world, either that or I'd stay away from the woman entirely——'

'Oh God——' my mother said, her face white.

'Steady,' Aunt Edna said, grasping her by the arm.

'And now you,' Grandfather went on. 'All of you, picking away, picking away, wanting something for nothing. I never got it for nothing. None of you know that. Not one of you knows it.'

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'Hold on a minute,' Uncle Dan protested 'I never said give, I said lend You'd have the horses for security You done it before, Tim '

'The more fool I, then,' Grandfather retorted 'I hoped you'd make a go of things But no It all went up in smoke or down in booze '

'That ain't true ' Uncle Dan cried .

But there was something feeble about his voice And I realized that it was true, what Grandfather had said

'No use in talking,' Grandfather said 'You can get out right now '

In the long silence, I looked at my grandfather's face He looked surprised, as though he could hardly believe he had spoken the words .Then his expression changed, grew set and stubborn

'I will,' Uncle Dan said slowly, 'and I'll not be coming back.'

'So much the better,' Grandfather said

Uncle Dan rose, walked out to the hall alone, and began putting on his coat

'We can't let him go like that,' Aunt Edna whispered. 'He's got no one——'

'Who's going to argue it?' my mother replied bitterly

The front door closed behind Uncle Dan, and everyone in the house stood quite still. Then a very unexpected thing happened

'Timothy,' Grandmother said, 'you'd best go after him '

### *The Sound of the Singing*

Grandfather swung around and stared at her  
'You're out of your mind,' he said  
'You'd best go now,' Grandmother said firmly,  
'before he gets too far'

For a moment I thought Grandfather was going to rage again, but he did not. He looked taken aback, almost stunned.

'You never liked his ways, Agnes,' he said.

Grandmother did not reply. She made a slight gesture towards the door, and that was all. *How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle*. The line slid stealthily into my mind, and I felt a surge of spiteful joy at it. Then I looked again at my grandfather's face, and saw there such a bleak bewilderment that I could feel only shame and sadness. His eyes chanced upon me, and when he spoke it was to me, as though he could not speak directly to any of the adults in that room.

'When he gets too old to look after himself, it'll be me that pays to have him kept in a home. It's not fair, Vanessa. It's not fair.'

He was right. It was not fair. Even I could see that. Yet I veered sharply away from his touch, and that was probably not fair, either. I wanted only to be by myself, with no one else around. I did not know then that this would never again be entirely possible, and that from now on they would always be there, whether they were actually with me or not.

Grandfather turned and looked at Grandmother.

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'I never thought to hear you take his part,' he said

Then he walked outside and we heard his flat unemphatic voice, speaking Uncle Dan's name

When Uncle Dan and Grandfather had come back to the living-room, the three old people settled down once more and sat silently in the blue-grey light of the spring evening, the lamps not flicked on yet nor the shades drawn I went upstairs with my mother and Aunt Edna The air in the bedroom was still sweet and heavy with 'Attar of Roses'

'Mercy, do I ever need a cigarette,' Aunt Edna said.

'If I didn't know Mother better, I'd say it was revenge,' my mother said.

'Know her? What makes you think you know her? Maybe it was just that.'

'Maybe,' my mother said, 'but I'd hate to think so, wouldn't you?'

'No,' my aunt said. 'I'd cheer like sixty.'

'Anyway, there's more to it than that,' my mother said 'We always just naturally assumed she loathed the sight of Uncle Dan, but she said to me once, "Whatever his faults, he's a cheerful soul, Beth, always remember that." I'd forgotten until now'

'Beth, do you think she ever considered marrying him?'

'What? Mother? Don't be ridiculous. What makes you say that?'

## *The Sound of the Singing*

'Remember how Uncle Dan used to take us out in that cutter of his in winter, when we were kids? Mother always worried in case we got dumped in a snowdrift or the horses ran away. Well, I went out once with him, and out of a clear sky he said, "She picked the right man, Edna, your mother, no question of it." That was a funny thing for him to say, wasn't it?'

'I don't suppose it meant anything,' my mother said

'I wonder, though,' Aunt Edna mused, 'what all of us would have been like, if she'd——'

'A pretty ragged bunch,' my mother said 'There's not much doubt about that. Oh Edna, think how he must feel — Father, I mean. We've never given him credit for what he's done.'

'I wouldn't say that,' Aunt Edna said. 'Imitation is the sincerest form of compliment, after all.'

My mother's head came up and she looked around this way and that, as though she smelled smoke and thought the house might be on fire.

'What do you mean by that?'

'You know quite well what I mean,' Aunt Edna replied. 'Not one of us could go any other way. What's more, for all you're always saying Vanessa takes after Ewen, you know perfectly well who she really takes after.'

'That's not so!' my mother burst out.

'Isn't it?' Aunt Edna cried. 'Isn't it?'

I was hardly aware of her meaning. I was



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going instead by the feel of the words, the same way the faithful must interpret the utterances of those who rise up and speak in tongues. Her voice was high and fearful, burdened with a terrible regret, as though she would have given anything not to have spoken.

We went downstairs then, and I helped to pass the coffee around, walking carefully because it was in the good Spode cups. Grandfather and Uncle Dan took theirs without a word. Grandmother said, 'Thank you, pet.' Her face was calm, and no one could even have begun to guess, from looking at her, what she might have been thinking, if anything. When he had finished his coffee, Uncle Dan said he thought he would just stroll down to the Regal Café and get a few humbugs.

My mother, coming in with the coffee-pot to see if anyone wanted a second cup, hesitated and looked from Uncle Dan to Grandfather, as though she didn't know which of them to ask and couldn't ask both of them at once. Finally she sighed, a mere breath, and refilled Grandfather's cup. Uncle Dan went out, humming softly to himself, and when he had reached the front sidewalk he began to sing. We heard the song growing fainter as he ambled away.

'Glory — o, Glory — o,  
To the bold Fenian men —'

Aunt Edna smothered a laugh. 'Fenian!  
Grandma Connor would have a fit!'

*The Sound of the Singing*

My mother suddenly put a hand out and touched  
me lightly on the shoulder

‘Go with him, Vanessa,’ she said. ‘Keep him  
company ’

And I ran, ran towards the sound of the singing  
But he seemed a long way off now, and I wondered  
if I would ever catch up to him

# *The Small Bequest*

MARY LAVIN

IT was generally understood that when Miss Tate died she would leave a small bequest to her companion, Miss Blodgett. There had never been any direct statement of the old lady's intention in the matter, but it was felt by all their friends to be an understood thing. Meanwhile, of course, Miss Blodgett was getting an excellent salary, most of which she should have been able to put aside, for not only was her keep provided but as well she had full enjoyment of all the luxuries that the Tate family were continually bestowing upon the old lady—the sweets, the fruits, the books, the papers. For Miss Tate, at eighty, was able only to appreciate the kind thought of the giver, the bodily appreciation of the gifts fell entirely to Miss Blodgett. As she herself often remarked, Miss Blodgett was just like one of the family. And indeed it was as such she was always treated.

The Tates felt themselves greatly in Miss Blodgett's debt for her tireless devotion to Miss Adeline Tate. It was now twenty-seven years since Miss Blodgett had moved into the elegant house in Rattigan Rowe, with her big wicker suitcase and

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her iron trunk They didn't know what Miss Adeline Tate would have done without her Lord Robert, Miss Tate's oldest nephew, expressed the feelings of the whole family one evening after a visit to Rattigan Rowe

'What a good job it is,' said Lord Robert, 'that Miss Blodgett is only sixty She's fairly sure of outlasting Aunt Adeline'

There had been a large family gathering in Rattigan Rowe that afternoon, and some of the family were dining that night with Lord Robert They all agreed with their host except Honoria Tate, his first cousin, who, being a lady barrister, felt compelled to point out that in that case instead of Miss Tate they would have Miss Blodgett on their hands.

'Oh, not at all!' said Lord Robert impatiently 'Aunt Adeline will see that Miss Blodgett is well taken care of after her death.'

'How?' asked Lucy Tate, Lord Robert's youngest daughter

'Don't be silly, Lucy dear,' said her father 'You know it is understood that Aunt Adeline will make a substantial mention of Miss Blodgett in her will'

'Oh, of course!' murmured Lucy, abashed and blushing 'I forgot! The bequest!' For she recalled at once that she had often heard her aunts and uncles mention Miss Blodgett's small bequest 'Dear Aunt Adeline!' she murmured

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Miss Tate was not Lucy's aunt at all, of course Miss Tate was her grandaunt, but like all the younger members of the family she had grown into the habit of calling the old lady by the name she heard on the lips of her elders. Miss Tate was Aunt Adeline to all of them. Even Lady Elizabeth's children, who were her great-grandnephews, never called her anything else.

It was quite disconcerting at times to hear some of the extremely young members of the family calling the old lady by such a familiar name. But then it was even more disconcerting to hear Miss Blodgett calling all the family by their familiar names, although perhaps it was natural enough for her to do so, considering that she knew them all since they were in their cradles, and had dandled most of them on her knee with as much affection, and a great deal more energy than Miss Tate had ever done. Sometimes, indeed, it seemed as if Emma Blodgett had never noticed that they had grown up, and in some cases, even grown old. Lord Robert was always Robbie to Miss Blodgett. The caustic Honoria was still Honey. And I never heard her call Lady Elizabeth Tate-Conyers anything else but Bessie.

The Tates were an old family that went back for eleven recorded generations of plain but prosperous people, who had, however, linked themselves all along the way with the best stock in the country. The root was a plain and sturdy natural

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growth, but successful grafting had resulted in the frequent breaking out of blossom. The family had rarely failed in any decade to show a famous belle, a great soldier, or a poet.

And so, when Miss Tate's nephews, nieces, grandnephews, grandnieces, and great-grand-nephews came to pay their respects to her on a Sunday afternoon, the drawing-room in Rattigan Rowe was filled with a gallant company, of which the old lady might well be proud.

And Miss Tate was extremely proud of them all. So, too, was Miss Blodgett. Although, here again, when one saw Miss Blodgett familiarly chaffing with judges and peers, and scolding a bishop for having snuff on his cuff, it was a little surprising to recollect that she had originally joined the Tate household in a humble capacity.

The only trace that still remained to indicate Miss Blodgett's original position in the family was that Miss Blodgett herself was never called by her Christian name. Miss Tate was the only one who called her Emma. The others delicately shrank from doing so in case it might seem to be taking advantage of her dependence. They felt it better to emphasize the difference between her and Hetty. Hetty was Miss Tate's old maidservant who had been with the family for fifty years. Hetty was another treasure, but of course she was only a plain servant.

The first day I moved in to the house next door

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to Miss Tate in Rattigan Rowe I found two visiting cards lying in the empty letter-box. On one neat glossy card was engraved the name of Miss Adeline Tate. On the other card, which was equally neat, equally white, if perhaps a little thinner, a little less glossy, there was printed the name of Emma Blodgett in pen and ink.

That afternoon I saw Miss Tate in her garden. It was some few days before I saw Miss Blodgett.

As a matter of fact, I was at first under the mistaken impression that I had seen both Miss Tate and Miss Blodgett, for there had been two old ladies in the garden, and the two old ladies in the garden had been dressed remarkably alike. They both wore long blue silk gowns, weighted at the hem with rows and rows of heavy braid, and tightly clipped bodices. They both wore wide and delightfully dilapidated blue straw hats, wreathed, or overpowered you might say, with large floppy silk flowers shaded from deep rose to pale pink, which the bees, that clouded around them like a nimbus, must have mistaken for real blooms. It is true that one of the old ladies was extremely elegant, and that the other was distinctly shabby, her silk gown having indeed innumerable patches and darns, but nevertheless I think my mistake was pardonable. I might perhaps have guessed that the old heiress would give away her worn gowns to her servant, but how on earth could I have known that Miss Tate's fanatical affection for

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animals, birds, insects and even slugs, was so great that on no account would she allow old Hetty to come out into the garden in either her cap or her apron in case their stiff white glare might startle her beloved pets, who wandered about the garden with as much composure as the ladies, the pet dogs, the tabby cats and the countless tame pigeons. Within doors, with the blue gown hidden under her old-fashioned capacious aprons, I would never have mistaken poor old Hetty for Miss Blodgett. Indeed, no two people could have been more dissimilar, although as a matter of fact Hetty and Miss Tate were not too unlike at all. Both were small and frail, but at the same time agile and keen. And in Hetty's face, as well as in Miss Tate's, where the flesh had thinned away with the years, the bone was seen to be fine and well chiselled. Miss Tate's face had, of course, the more delicate outline.

It was a pity that Miss Tate had never married. It was a pity she should have thought fit to discontinue the work of eleven generations, for there could be no doubt, I think, that this charming old figurine was the result of careful selection and breeding. And yet, it was surprising to see how a generation or two of poverty and privation could accelerate the pace of this bone refinement, because there was undoubtedly something attractive and endearing in old Hetty's clear and angular face. Still, no matter what is said, it was stupid of me to have mistaken her for Miss Blodgett. And when



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I saw Miss Blodgett go down the steps into the garden a few days later, it was immediately clear that Hetty was no more than a servant

'Hetty,' called out Miss Blodgett, 'I forgot my sunshade Run into the house and get it for me '

And when Hetty, who had been putting some seedlings into the ground for Miss Tate, stood up to do the message, she lowered her eyes deferentially while Miss Blodgett sailed past

There could be no mistake this time. This could be no other than Miss Blodgett When she got to the end of the garden I was amused to see Emma Blodgett wag her finger at Miss Tate

'Not so much bending!' she cried 'Not so much bending!' And, drawing up a garden seat, she called Hetty, who had returned with the sunshade, to send her into the potting shed for an iron footrest 'The grass is so damp in a garden,' she said, as she settled herself plumply down to watch Miss Tate and Hetty continue their work with the seedlings.

Miss Blodgett was a big woman She had a soft, warm, friendly face , a very nice person, one would say unhesitatingly, but rather dull, perhaps even stupid She was only about sixty ; much younger than Miss Tate, much younger even than Hetty, but less active Her round plump face was perpetually flushed. She had a mass of gray hair, strong, straight and unruly. Her figure was stout too, and she had a surprisingly matronly bosom for a spinster of her years.

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Miss Blodgett wore blue also. As a matter of fact, she, too, was dressed somewhat similarly to Miss Tate, and yet there was some very great difference which even I, from my study window, could see but could not at once define. First I thought it was a matter of length, for although, like Miss Tate, Miss Blodgett wore her skirts longer than was fashionable, they were not as long as Miss Tate's. Whatever impulse made her disregard fashion had not been as strong as the old lady's, and was probably only imitation of her, for where Miss Tate's long blue silk hemline hung down to hide her ankles, Miss Blodgett's stopped short a cowardly inch or two up from the ground, and revealed a pair of plump ankles with a tendency to swell, and possibly some other weakness as well, because Miss Blodgett wore thick blue woollen stockings even at this, the hottest time of the year. It was impossible to tell what kind of stockings Miss Tate wore, no one ever saw Miss Tate's little ankles. But to go back to Miss Blodgett's dress again, as I said, I thought at first it differed only in length from Miss Tate's blue gown. Then I thought I detected a slight difference in the shade. Still later I decided it was a matter of age, but I soon dismissed that idea because Hetty's gown, although so tattered and shabby, was in other respects exactly like Miss Tate's new gown. It was not, however, until the first day I went to take tea with the ladies that I discovered the difference between the three blue

*Mary Lavin*

gowns It was simply this that Miss Blodgett's gown did not rustle ! You know what that meant It was blue It was silky It was cut to much the same pattern as the gown Miss Tate wore But it didn't rustle In other words, it was not quite the same quality It was not the genuine real thing And of course Miss Blodgett did not realize this at all

'Look at Miss Tate,' she said to me one day after we had become familiar over many cups of tea in their house and in mine 'Look at Miss Tate ! She pays twice what I pay for the material in her gowns, and mine is just exactly the same No one could tell the difference But the shop-keepers impose on Miss Tate They know she has plenty of money They don't impose on me ! I'm well able for them !' And having triumphantly said this, Miss Blodgett begged me to have more cake, and as she went over to the table, I heard the slight creaking sound of the artificial silk fabric , while at the next moment Miss Tate delicately rustled across the room to me And indeed, as my ear caught that rustle, which was as faint as a sigh, at the same time, in the far corner of the room where Hetty was pouring out tea, I caught another rustle that was fainter still And if the rustle in Miss Tate's gown was like a sigh, the rustle that came from under Hetty's voluminous white apron was like the echo of a sigh.

I became very friendly with the ladies in the

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house next door, but long before I met them I had become extraordinarily familiar with the sight of Hetty and Miss Tate in the garden

The gardens of the houses in Rattigan Rowe were large and secluded for city gardens. They were separated from each other by solid high walls of beautifully cut granite, on which stonecrop and red valerian flowered freely. But from the upper windows of the houses the gardens were not so secluded, and from my study at the back of the house in the second story I could see into every nook and cranny of my neighbours' gardens. The best comment I can make upon Miss Tate's garden is that from the first day I looked down into it I never bothered to look into the other gardens in the Rowe. They, like my own, were plain city gardens, with a plot of grass at the top and a few apple trees at the end. But Miss Tate's garden — well, I was hardly a day in Rattigan Rowe when I realized I would have to change my study to the front of the house if I was ever to do any work. It was the most distracting garden I had ever seen.

In the first place, it was almost entirely given over to the old lady's pets, and everywhere on the small plot of lawn near the house, upon the grass and upon the green metal seats, and even raised on specially constructed standards, there were bowls of water of all shapes and sizes, wide and narrow, deep and shallow, to facilitate the different needs of bird and beast and butterfly. And although to

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either side of the grass plot there were small flower beds, in them there bloomed only a few of those fragrant old flowers that were fashionable when Miss Tate was a girl, muskroses, heliotrope, lavender, and clove carnations, and a few other flowers of unpretentious aspect, whose names I did not know, but which I afterward found out were grown specially for the bees and the butterflies. There were no vegetables, unless you count a giant clump of catmint, in the corner under my window, which was grown specially for the tabby cats.

This grass plot with its border of flowers was, however, only one small fraction of the garden. The rest of it was planted all over with small flowering trees in which the birds and bees kept up a continual orchestration, the bees and pigeons supplying the low bass undertones, the blackbirds and thrushes breaking the hum with high trebles. These flowering trees, although they were fully matured, were of such a nature that, although as old as Miss Tate, they were, like her, frail and delicate even in their age. And in comparison with the plain old trees in the public park beyond the lane at the back of our gardens, they looked like mere branches stuck into the ground and tied all over with paper flowers, some pink, some yellow, some blue.

Viewed from my study window, indeed, the whole of Miss Tate's garden looked as unreal, but as entrancing as the miniature gardens that children used to construct long ago in shallow saucers,

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Japanese gardens which, when they were made, tantalized them with a longing to be small enough to wander within them

Watching Miss Tate and Hetty wandering in their dreamy unreal garden, under the small flower-trees, I was often tantalized myself with a desire to throw down my books and join them under those bloom-laden branches that seemed to be continually shedding either petals or fragrance — or fragments of bird song

It was at night, however, that Miss Tate's garden was most tantalizingly beautiful. Then, the moon shone down in misty brightness over it, leaving the dark depths undisturbed and mysterious as the cold sea, but washing the tops of the small trees with light, and striking gleams from the glossy leaves as gleams are struck from the pointed wave. And in the middle of this misty moonlit sea the small white-painted glasshouse with its pointed roof seemed to float through the night like a silver barque of romance.

If ever a house were the harbour of happiness, it should surely be the house looking over that blossom-tossed garden. Yet, the first day I ever set foot in it, I felt there was something wrong. There was some uneasiness in the house. There was some slight strain between Miss Tate and Miss Blodgett. But what it could be was impossible to imagine, for seldom had two people more to give each other. On the one hand, Miss Tate gave Miss

*Mary Lavin*

Blodgett not only a home, but a beautiful home, not only a salary, but a bountiful one. And lastly, although not least, there was this understanding about the small bequest. Miss Blodgett, on the other hand, was a perfect companion for Miss Tate. She not only ran the house, and supervised Hetty, but she had, it appeared, no friends or relatives at all of her own, and so even such time as she was supposed to have free for her own purposes, was lavished also on Miss Tate, and occupied in doing errands and messages for her in town. In short, Miss Tate gave Miss Blodgett a share in everything she possessed and made no distinction whatsoever between them, and Miss Blodgett, although she could only give Miss Tate her time and her interest and her care, gave them without stint and kept back not one morsel for herself.

Yet, as I say, I felt there was something uneasy in their relationship, I felt it instinctively on the first day I took tea with the ladies, but I could not name it nor trace it to any cause. And when I became an habitual visitor in the house next door, still never a visit passed, however happily and pleasantly, without my getting at some time or another a feeling that all was not well. At some time or another I would see a little arrow in Miss Tate's blue eyes, and something sharp would shoot through the air.

At first I merely felt the vibration it left in the air. But then one day I actually saw it flash out ;

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a little silver arrow of dissatisfaction I saw it flash out, yes, but I was no wiser afterward I still could see no cause for the old lady's sharpness, and when, afterward, I pieced together the conversation of that visit, a more innocuous conversation could not be imagined There wasn't a single remark in it that could have rasped anyone's nerves as far as I could see And Miss Blodgett who was picking up some dropped stitches had contributed to it only by smiles and nods or at most, I am almost sure, a single remark Yet it was at Miss Blodgett that the arrow had been aimed

There was only one grandniece to tea that day Honoria's eldest girl, Martha, one of the quietest of the family, a bit dull you might even say Whenever Martha was there the conversation was always somewhat slow The two ladies knitted, and the talk never ventured much beyond worsted and yarn It is hard to recall an insipid conversation But I took pains to recall every word, in order to see why that little silver arrow had been sped from the bow

Tea was over and Hetty was clearing it away

'That's pretty wool, Aunt Adehne,' said Martha, looking at the candy pink wool that Miss Tate was knitting

'You saw it the last time you were here,' said Miss Tate.

'Did I? Are you sure, Aunt Adehne? I thought you were knitting something with blue wool the last time'



*Mary Lavin*

'It's two years since I knitted anything in blue wool,' said Miss Tate 'The last thing I knitted in blue wool was a scarf for your brother Edward'

'Oh, but this was only the other day, Aunt Adeline,' said poor Martha, 'and it wasn't a scarf for Edward, it was a shawl for Miriam's child' .

Miss Tate looked up, and so did Miss Blodgett.

'This is the shawl,' the two ladies said, speaking at the same time, and then Miss Tate said that she had been working at it for the last six weeks 'I'll never make a shawl again,' she said, 'it's so tiresome'

Poor Martha put out her hand and drew over a corner of the pink knitted shawl

'Such an intricate pattern!' she said 'You have wonderful patience, Aunt Adeline'

At this point, I remember it all exactly, Miss Tate dropped a stitch, and while she was trying to take it up she did not catch Martha's last remark

'What did you say, Martha, dear?' she said, when the stitch was safe on the needle again.

'I said you have wonderful patience, Aunt Adeline,' said poor Martha the second time

But Aunt Adeline did not hear it the second time either. Now Aunt Adeline was not deaf, but she was decidedly nervous in case she might get deaf, and, always, if she failed to catch something that was said for any reason whatever, whether it was due to a noise in the room or an indistinctness

### *The Small Bequest*

on the part of the person who spoke, or, as in this case, because she just wasn't listening, she was always flurried, and it usually resulted in the remark having to be repeated several times after that before she caught it. It was nervousness, nothing else. I often noticed that on such occasions Miss Blodgett was invaluable, either repeating what had been said calmly and clearly, or, better still, diverting Miss Tate's attention to something else so that she forgot that she had missed hearing something. But on this occasion when Miss Blodgett came to the rescue, in my ignorance I thought it was her interference that annoyed Miss Tate, for it was right after Miss Blodgett spoke that I saw the arrow.

'Martha said you have wonderful patience, Aunt Adeline,' said Miss Blodgett kindly, and she was just putting out her hand to fix a cushion that had slipped out of place on Miss Tate's chair when Miss Tate let loose the arrow.

'All old people are patient!' snapped Miss Tate. 'But the Tates were never patient before ninety.'

Poor Martha blushed. But it was not at Martha the arrow was aimed. It was at Miss Blodgett. I saw it. I saw it go out, aimed straight for Miss Blodgett's heart. But somehow it missed its aim. Miss Blodgett sat knitting as placidly as ever, smiling, and nodding her head in rhythm with the clicking knitting needles. Perhaps the arrow hit and splintered against the large cameo brooch that rose and

*Mary Lavin*

fell on her big bosom I don't know Martha, however, was upset She was not quick enough to see the arrow, but she was not dull enough to be unaware that something was amiss She thought, poor girl, that she was at fault, that she had said something to offend Miss Tate Her eyes filled with tears.

Miss Tate saw the tears She understood at once what had happened I saw her give an angry look at Miss Blodgett's cameo brooch and then she turned around with a gracious smile to Martha

'Come and we will go into the garden, Martha, my dear,' she said 'Give me your arm. I must get a rose for my favourite grandniece' The old lady was her gracious, sweet self again Over me, too, she shed her graciousness 'Will you come with us,' she asked, turning toward me, 'and I'll get one for you too' But at the door the old lady paused. 'Martha is like all the Tates,' she said, 'she loves flowers' And then, turning around again sharply, she nodded at Miss Blodgett, who had gone over to the window and was sitting with her back to it 'Miss Blodgett wouldn't know a cauliflower from a rose,' she said, and in an instant another little arrow went through the air.

But Miss Blodgett smiled. Miss Blodgett did not feel any prick this time, either Before she turned around to answer I saw that her dress was fastened up the back with a little row of white pearl buttons. I was not near enough to see if

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one of them was scratched or broken, but I think it could hardly have been otherwise

Miss Blodgett smiled when she turned around

'I don't mind gardens,' she said complacently, 'but there are so many unpleasant things in a garden, bees and wasps, and ants and slugs. I'm quite satisfied to sit here at the window and get the sun through the glass.' And smiling benignly, she went on with her knitting

Miss Tate took Martha's arm and my arm, and we went out gossiping lightly, Miss Tate making an unusual fuss over Martha all the time, picking her the best and most beautiful roses, and several times asking me if I saw any likeness between them

She was determined to be charming. She insisted on giving me a bouquet too, and as she pressed the bunch of red roses into my hand I felt that this charming old lady may have known that I saw that arrow speeding through the air, and wanted to divert my mind from what I had seen. In fact, when I was leaving, she kept me standing at the small green gate at the end of the garden telling me how good Miss Blodgett was to her, and how much she was indebted to her dear companion.

'She has a kind heart,' said Miss Tate. 'Not like the Tates. The Tates all have a bitter streak in them.' She smiled at me then, and she smiled at Martha. But Martha protested

'Oh, Aunt Adeline! you're very naughty! Such a thing to say about us!' said poor Martha,

*Mary Lavin*

who was destined to be again the cause of trouble

For just then Miss Blodgett came to the steps leading down to the garden and, overhearing Martha's remark, she smiled at her with her wide benevolent smile

'Did I hear you say Aunt Adeline was naughty, Martha?' she asked, and before she said another word, there in the brilliant sunny air, with the birds singing and the bees humming from flower to flower, Miss Tate let fly a third and dreadfully sharp little arrow

What was the meaning of it at all? I hugged my roses tightly, said good-bye, and went into my own garden greatly perplexed

After that I saw the arrow several times, but only when I was near at hand

At other times I would sit in my window and look down at Miss Tate and Hetty in the garden and think how gentle and sweet Miss Tate looked And even when Miss Blodgett came out, and the two old ladies took tea together under the trees, there seemed to be tranquillity, and they presented a charming picture of peace and happiness and sweetness. They would sip tea, the two of them, and Miss Tate would perhaps call Hetty and pour out a cup of tea for her, and insist on the old servant drinking it there and then, standing beside them at the tea-table with perhaps one of the lap dogs she had been combing caught up under her arm, or a bundle of weeds that she was going to

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burn at the bottom of the plot    On those occasions  
I saw no arrows

Yet as surely as I went to tea with the old ladies  
a little slender arrow would pierce the air, and make  
straight for Miss Blodgett's heart

I pondered a great deal over the whole thing  
At first I thought there was some deep and serious  
reason for Miss Tate's antagonism to Emma Blodgett  
Then a small incident occurred to make me  
veer around to quite the opposite opinion, and  
decide that it was something very trivial that was  
getting on the old lady's nerves, and that it was  
another case of the Princess and the Pea

I had not called on the ladies for some days  
and this afternoon I went to the green garden gate  
and pushed it open to pay them a short visit    They  
were going to take tea in the garden, and Hetty  
had just laid the tray on the wicker garden table  
When I walked across the grass the old ladies were  
pulling their chairs over to the table, and Miss  
Blodgett relieved Miss Tate of a large catalogue at  
which they had both been looking    She threw it  
down on the grass underneath the table

'Hetty, another cup !' said Miss Blodgett, and  
Miss Tate put one of the tabby cats down from his  
chair and invited me to take his place.    Then, as  
Hetty brought out the other cup and turned to go  
back into the house, Miss Tate called her again

'Hetty,' she said, 'I want you to put on your  
hat and coat and go down to the hospital to ask

*Mary Lavin*

how Mr Robbie's baby is getting on to-day '

'Is the baby sick ?' I cried 'In hospital, did you say ?'

Lord Robert's son and namesake young Robbie had recently married, and there had been great excitement at the birth of his first son, Lord Robert's grandson, and another great-grandnephew for Miss Adeline Tate I felt very bad at hearing it was not doing well

'The doctor says he won't live,' said Miss Tate, when I begged her again to tell me what was the matter with it 'There's something the matter with its spine,' she said 'It was weakly from the start '

'Oh, dear,' I said, and I looked at them both Miss Blodgett sighed sadly

I felt uncomfortable

'Perhaps if I hadn't come you would be going to the hospital to see it ?' I said, rising from my chair 'Please don't let me intrude. I only called for a minute I'll call again another day '

But the two old ladies excelled each other in assuring me that I must on no account leave them. Miss Blodgett rose to press me down into my chair again, while Miss Tate insisted over and over again that a few minutes before I appeared they were planning to send Hetty out with a note asking me to call.

'Because we just got a present of some rose geranium jelly that we want you to sample with

### *The Small Bequest*

us,' said Miss Tate. 'Sit down ! Sit down !' And they began to pour out three cups of tea and take the cover from the geranium jelly that its fragrance might tempt me to stay

I stayed, but I was uneasy waiting for Hetty to come back. She was a long time away. In fact, she did not come back until I was going. I was letting myself out by the front door when I met Hetty in the hall.

I looked inquiringly at her.

'Is it better ?' I asked eagerly.

Hetty was calm.

'No,' she said, 'but it was a good job I went up there. It's dead,' and with a remarkable compromise between deference and impatience, she prepared to pass me. 'I must tell Miss Tate,' she said.

I was confused. I tried to detain her. Surely she was not going to rush out and tell them the news bluntly, like that ?

'Hetty, wait,' I cried. 'Are you going to tell them at once ?'

Hetty looked surprised.

'What else would I do ?' she asked.

'Don't you think if you waited a little while, and broke it gently to them ?' I stumbled with my words. Had Hetty no sense ? Couldn't she see what I meant ? 'If you said it was worse, and then later on you could say it wasn't expected to live, and then perhaps they might be prepared for the shock and you could tell them the truth ?'



*Mary Lavin*

But Hetty stared at me 'What about the wreath?' she asked

'The wreath?' I repeated

'Yes,' said Hetty 'Miss Tate will want to order it at once She'll want time to decide on what flowers to have put in it She'd be most annoyed if she wasn't told in time' Hetty looked at me, and then, taking into consideration that I was, after all, a comparative stranger, she paused to give me an impatient explanation 'Miss Tate always sends a magnificent wreath to any funeral inside the family,' she said

And with this Hetty hurried away I stood uncertainly looking after her I saw her run down the steps into the garden I saw her go across the grass and I saw the ladies look up expectantly. I saw Hetty say something to them and make an energetic gesture

I waited In spite of what Hetty said, I felt I might be needed And I was on the point of turning around and going back to the garden, anyway, when I saw the two ladies rise excitedly to their feet And in the soft summer air Miss Tate's voice carried in to me distinctly

'The wreath!' she said. 'Quick! Where is the catalogue?' and they hastily pushed aside the tea table and picked up the catalogue from the grass, the catalogue that they had been scanning when I went in It was a florists' catalogue, and even at such a distance I could see the illustrations of wreaths

### *The Small Bequest*

and artificial bouquets, flowering crosses, and glass-domed immortelles 'Give it to me,' said Miss Tate, putting on her glasses and stretching out her hand

'Wait a minute,' said Miss Blodgett, withholding it 'We marked a pretty one, don't you remember?'

I didn't wait to hear any more I could see why it had occurred to Hetty not to break the news to them The old ladies had long since passed into that time of life when they were no longer capable of feeling the great emotions, like children their joys and sorrows were as real as other people's, but they were inspired by smaller things

I stood looking out at them in their sunny garden for a few minutes longer, and as I did was certain now that whatever discord there was between them sprang from something trivial and small I decided to put it out of my mind, and not to let it bother me further

This, however, it was impossible to do for long I never went into the house next door without feeling the familiar quiver in the air. The room might be filled with nieces and nephews. The talk might be gay and general and happy. But at some time or another, I would see the little arrow in Miss Tate's eye And at the most unexpected moment she would let it fly Perhaps one of the young people would call something to her across the room, and Miss Tate, talking to another member of the family, would not hear

*Mary Lavin*

'Aunt Adeline!' the young thing would call out again, and then Miss Blodgett would step in

'Aunt Adeline! Aunt Adeline! Lucy is calling you'

Miss Tate would look up. She never failed to hear Miss Blodgett. And inexplicably then, she would let fly the little arrow.

'I hear! I hear!' Miss Tate would say. 'It's nothing important, I suppose!' and she would glance very fiercely at Miss Blodgett. But to the young thing who had called her she would cross the room courteously and, sitting down beside her, she would listen to all she had to say.

This, as a matter of fact, was a common scene, but one day when the drawing-room was crowded with a great many of the Tates, and their husbands and wives and betrotheds, there was a slight difference in the scene, although it began in the same way, and it was Lucy who called out to her grand-aunt and Miss Blodgett who drew Miss Tate's attention to her. But this day, Miss Tate, who had been sitting beside me, stood up, and I positively trembled. I felt that she was going to let loose a whole quiverful of arrows, so fierce did a strange light shine in her eye.

'Aunt Adeline! Lucy is calling you'

That was all Miss Blodgett said, but Miss Tate shot a fierce glance at her and turned around to Lucy, almost as crossly.

'I can't come now, my dear,' she said, and she

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turned to indicate me, as I sat behind her on the sofa 'I just promised our neighbour here that I would show her the family photographs'

I felt more uneasy than ever This was the first I had heard of the promise I saw, too, that Lucy was crestfallen at the snub But Miss Tate was inexorable She moved over to the mantelpiece on which there were set out anything from twenty to thirty photographs in silver and filigree frames, showing a bewildering array of old ladies and young, of bearded men and men so young they were like girls There were small girls in frilly dresses and little boys in velvet suits and little boys in sailor suits There were brides without number, in silks and lace There were at least six men in uniform There was Lord Robert in his wig, Lucy in a ball dress, Honoria in her college gown — but simpler to say who was absent than who was present in this crowded silver gallery on the mantelpiece Miss Tate beckoned me to follow her and took up the frame nearest to hand

'This was my mother,' she said, pushing the silver frame into my hand, but I had hardly time to glance at it when it was snatched away and another pushed into my hand 'That was a grand-uncle,' she said, and she nodded back at the young people 'He would be the children's great-great-granduncle' She snatched back the great-granduncle. 'This is a nephew,' she said 'He was killed playing polo'

*Mary Lavin*

And then, one after another, she rammed the silver frames into my hands, and snatched them away again almost as quickly, so that I had hardly time to do more than glimpse the merest details of them. At first I strove to keep pace with her, tried to exclaim that the old ladies were charming, the young officers handsome, and the soldiers looked fearless and brave. But as she rammed the cold frames into my hands and snatched them away again I became aware that behind this plan of showing me the photographs there was some hidden motive.

At last she had come to the end of them.

'Well?' she said in a loud voice, and I saw her look all around the room. She wanted everyone to hear.

'Well?' she said, 'what do you think of that for a family?'

'They all have remarkably fine faces,' I said, awkwardly. It was true, but I felt embarrassed saying it out aloud.

'But didn't you notice anything?' asked Miss Tate. And then I knew that it was not my comment she wanted but an opportunity to make one of her own. 'Didn't you notice how strong the likeness is all down the line?' She turned back and took down the great-granduncle again. 'The Tates all had aquiline noses,' she said. 'All the dead Tates had them, all the living Tates have them.' I looked around nervously, and true enough, although I had not paid much attention to it before, there were a large number of noses in the room,

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all of an aquiline shape, Miss Tate had snatched up another frame 'Look at Great-Uncle Samuel's nose !' She snatched up another 'Look at this nose Look at that nose !' and then, leaving down the last frame so carelessly, the young man in uniform, who was looking out from it over his aquiline nose, fell flat on his face on the marble slab, Miss Tate held up her little head 'Look at my nose !' she said triumphantly Then in a still louder clearer voice, that had by now caught the attention of the whole room, the old lady repeated her first statement 'Yes, the Tates all have aquiline noses,' she said 'And the men are all tall, and the women are all small And' — here Miss Tate drew a deep breath — 'we were always noted for our ankles' The old lady turned around swiftly to Lucy 'Look at Lucy,' she said. 'Pull up your skirt, Lucy, and show your ankles.' She turned around 'Look at Martha !' she said 'Martha, why do you wear such dark stockings ? It's a shame Dark stockings are all right for people with clumsy feet' And then, to my astonishment, Miss Tate's little hand swooped downward and lifted the hem of her own blue gown 'In my day,' she said, 'we might as well have had no legs at all, but I have the Tate ankles, too. Noses and ankles that's how you can always tell the Tates !'

And then, as she said this, Miss Tate turned around deliberately and looked at Miss Blodgett, and distinctly, as on the other occasions, I saw it

*Mary Lavin*

flash out, the little <sup>3</sup>glance of hatred And where did it fly? It flew straight for the spot where Miss Blodgett sat smiling complacently upon all the company, and it was aimed, of all places, at a point just below the hemline of the blue gown of imitation silk where Emma's fat ankles were complacently crossed one over the other in their thick, ribbed, woollen stockings

And all at once I understood

And I think that Lucy, who was a sensitive girl, might have understood too, for she gave an embarrassed laugh

'I'm afraid you're as vain as a young girl, Aunt Adeline!' she said

But Miss Blodgett did not betray the slightest upset As a matter of fact, she laughed heartily

'That's good! Did you hear what Lucy said?' she cried, poking Miss Tate with the end of her knitting needle 'You're as vain as a girl, Aunt Adeline'

Aunt Adeline!

There they were, the simple words that had occurred in all the simple sentences I had analysed so unsuccessfully in my effort to find out what was poisoning Miss Tate against Miss Blodgett.

Aunt Adeline. Aunt Adeline I recalled at once how these words had occurred on every occasion just before the venomous arrow was let fly from the bow Everything that Miss Tate possessed in the world was at the disposal of Miss

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Blodgett, except one thing — the family blood Miss Blodgett had no drop of it, and without it, and without the Tate nose and the Tate ankles, she was guilty of a grievous lapse every time she called Miss Tate by the family name reserved for the use of the Lucys and Robbies

- I felt an instant pang of apprehension in my heart I recalled the gossip I had heard about the small bequest What if Miss Blodgett should jeopardize her chance of it? What if she should forfeit it?

I positively trembled Why, Miss Blodgett was so much a part of the family that most of her salary, lavish as it was, went in buying worsted for the bonnets and shawls she was continually knitting for the Tate progeny, and in small but frequent purchases of confetti and ribbons and good-luck tokens for the numerous Tate brides Why! I thought in panic, what a lot of money she must have spent if it was on nothing more than wreaths for the Tate corpses Why! Miss Blodgett could hardly have saved a penny She would be absolutely dependent on that small bequest

Really, I felt so bad I took my leave shortly afterward And all that week the affair preyed on my mind I began to dread going into that house For every time that Miss Blodgett addressed Miss Tate as Aunt Adehne, I felt my heart freeze Every time she said it I felt the small bequest was more and more in jeopardy.



*Mary Lavin*

And so, when at the end of the summer and I about to leave for the South of England as was my custom, I felt a certain relief as I went out to say good-bye to the ladies. They came to the door to wave me out of sight. They seemed sorry to part with me. Miss Blodgett had tears in her eyes. As I went down the steps from the hall door she linked her arm in Miss Tate's arm and called out after me.

'Aunt Adeline will miss you! Won't you, Aunt Adeline?'

Those were her last words to me before I set out. I didn't dare turn round. I simply could not bear to see that little silver arrow.

The following spring, when I came back, the house next door was boarded up for sale. A few forlorn pigeons hovered uncertainly on the eave shoot. A stray cat or two slunk in and out between the railings. They were not the regular pets belonging to the house, but it was clear they had had claims on its hospitality and could not realize their claims had ceased.

Miss Tate was dead.

There was no sign whatever of Miss Blodgett.

About a week after my return, however, one day as I was walking into town I took a short cut through those dreary intermediary streets which lie between the business section and the residential areas like Rattigan Rowe, but which have not yet degenerated into slums. Here fine old houses that had once been fashionable residences stood

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forlorn, bereft of their elegant curtains and their gay window-boxes, their elaborate brass knockers painted to save labour. The particular street through which I passed had been saved from complete degeneration by reason of the fact that several of the houses had been turned into offices and sets of service flats, and the few that had remained in private hands had been retained by their owners at the cost of turning them into respectable boarding-houses.

And coming down the steps of one of the most precarious and ramshackle of these boarding-houses, who should I see but Emma Blodgett.

Dear Miss Blodgett! How glad I was to see her! I waved to her, and hurried across the street with both hands outstretched. But even before I reached the other side I saw with a sinking of the heart that, although only a few short months had passed since I had last seen her, Miss Blodgett was decidedly shabbier in her appearance. Her clothes were as clean and neat as ever, but she no longer had that sheltered look that all Miss Tate's household had had last summer, from Miss Tate down even to the fat cats and the fat pigeons. Indeed, Miss Blodgett, at that moment, reminded me of the poor perplexed pigeons that I had seen clinging to the eaves in Rattigan Rowe.

But of course I did not pretend to notice any change, although I felt dreadfully upset about the poor thing, and feared that my worst forebodings

## *Mary Lavin*

about the bequest had been true And yet, somehow, it did not seem like Miss Tate, dead or alive, to break her promise I found it hard to see how she could have omitted Miss Blodgett's name from her testament when it was, as it were, an understood thing that it would be included

'Dear Miss Blodgett !' I cried, and I sympathized with her for the loss of Miss Tate And yet I felt a necessity to be guarded in my condolences 'So poor Miss Tate has left her garden,' I said, and I watched Miss Blodgett carefully as I said it

But Emma Blodgett's eyes filled with tears

'Yes,' she said 'Poor Aunt Adeline !' and then she took out a small handkerchief, that was not, alas, as spotlessly laundered as it might have been last year, but which, from the border of real lace that ran delicately around its hem, I saw was undoubtedly one of the small treasures that Miss Blodgett had amassed in her years at Rattigan Rowe 'Yes,' she said, and she blew her nose, and there was no mistaking her sorrow

I felt very much better. I felt I had been unjust to the memory of Miss Tate. Miss Blodgett's shabby appearance was due no doubt to the fact that she now had to be more prudent. She was living her own life now, and not the life of an heiress And wasn't she justified in her prudence ? Wasn't thrift a virtue when you were poor ? And when you had no home, but had to pay for every morsel you eat, and for the roof over your head,

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could you afford to be too prodigal with your money ?

And then, all those years when there had been talk and gossip about the bequest that Miss Tate was expected to leave to her companion, had it not always been particularly stated that it would be a small bequest ? Why — another aspect of the situation struck me. Goodness knows how small it might have been ! It might have been a mere nothing, a paltry sum. Then a worse thought struck me ! Perhaps it had not been money at all. How often have old ladies and gentlemen of eighty or ninety set such a value on small personal possessions that they have carelessly disposed of their impersonal millions at the advice of lawyer or vicar, to lavish all their attention on the disposal of some worthless little trinket, a lock of hair, or an old Bible, because on it they had, in those last sad hours of abnegation, set more value than upon all their millions, some worthless object in which they felt they had distilled the essence of a life, and which they were loathest to leave behind them, but which unfortunately was of no more value than a stone, and was, like a stone, alas, negotiable into nothing.

I looked hurriedly at Miss Blodgett, who was indeed weeping copiously now, as between sobs she described Miss Tate's last hours to me.

'I was with her to the last breath,' she said, and here she sobbed again. 'I held her hand all the time. She clutched my fingers till the very end.'

At this point Miss Blodgett put out her hand

## *Mary Lavin*

and clasped mine in illustration of that last touching scene, but as she did so she was recalled swiftly from the bedside of her dead friend as her eye, and mine, caught sight of a large hole in the finger of her glove. Miss Blodgett hurriedly withdrew her hand.

‘Oh,’ she cried, ‘I must have caught my glove in something. It seems to be torn.’

But the tear was not a new one. It had a jagged and frayed edge that told its own story. And irresistibly my eye travelled to Miss Blodgett’s other hand. In the other glove there was a second and indeed a slightly larger hole, and out through it came another finger, which, alas, was not as immaculate as one would have expected. The fingernail was indeed decidedly grimy, and showed that Miss Blodgett’s landlady evidently allowed her paying guest the privilege of doing out her own room, and blacking her own fire grate.

I looked away hurriedly. But you know how it is? The eye is a most unruly member. Do what I might it would rove back irresistibly to the hole in Miss Blodgett’s glove, and where my eye went, irresistibly it seemed Miss Blodgett’s blue eye followed.

At last it came to a point where I must either go away or one of us must make some remark. We must lay the ghost of that torn glove that hovered between us, interrupting our conversation, making us awkward and ill at ease. Miss Blodgett laid it

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'Poor Miss Tate,' she said suddenly, and she held out her hand frankly and displayed not only the torn tips of the gloves but the fact that the palms of both gloves were worn so thin that her pink flesh showed through them 'Poor Miss Tate How distressed she would be if she saw me looking so shabby!'

I didn't quite know what to say, but remembering that Emma Blodgett was so friendless and isolated, with no one perhaps in the whole world to take an interest in her, I felt that I could venture a step further without any danger of being thought vulgarly curious

'I hope her death has not caused too great a change in your circumstances,' I said, and then feeling that I had not handled the situation very well I ran on impulsively 'I mean, I always understood that Miss Tate intended to arrange matters so that you should never want for anything after her death' I hurried my words 'You know!' I cried 'The small bequest!'

I spoke hurriedly with my eyes on the ground. I was afraid to look up But Miss Blodgett had dissolved into tears again, and lo! again they were tears of love, and affection

'Poor Aunt Adeline!' she said 'A small bequest! That was so like her, to underestimate every impulse of her dear, kind heart.' She looked at me a little sternly. 'You wouldn't call a thousand pounds a small bequest, would you?' she asked.

*Mary Lavin*

I was astonished, astonished I had never thought about how much Miss Tate was likely to leave her companion, but I must admit I had hardly expected it to be more than a few hundreds

'Oh, Miss Blodgett,' I said, putting out my hand again and taking hers, 'I congratulate you!' But what, I wondered, was the mystery of the broken gloves?

Miss Blodgett withdrew her hand quickly

'Congratulate me?' she asked 'Sympathize with me, you mean There's nothing to congratulate me about You see, I didn't get the money And what is more, it looks as if I'm never going to get it'

'What?' I was bewildered, up one minute and down the next Surely none of the noble and wealthy Tates were going to contest this reasonable if generous bequest? Considering how much they must have shared among themselves, the size of this bequest, if its size had surprised them, should have added to the family pride in its own magnanimity 'Surely they're not going to contest the will?' I cried

'Oh, dear, no,' cried Miss Blodgett 'They feel worse than I do In fact, Lord Robert is doing all in his power for me. He insisted on my getting the best solicitor I could get, and Miss Lucy Tate couldn't be surpassed for her kindness They are all, all so kind, and so upset on my account The Tates are like that you know' They are the

### *The Small Bequest*

kindest people in the world They think of me as one of themselves ' She sighed 'And poor Aunt Adeline !' she said 'She was the kindest of them all Indeed, I can only hope she is not looking down now and seeing all the trouble she caused, without realizing it, out of the goodness of her heart For you see,' said Miss Blodgett, and she looked up at me earnestly, 'it was because she was trying to be too kind to me that I lost the legacy '

I didn't pretend to understand

'Well, you know,' said Miss Blodgett, 'you know the way she always considered me one of the family ? You know how she liked me to call her Aunt Adeline, just as if I was related to her in blood ? You know all that, don't you ? You could see it for yourself ?'

Miss Blodgett looked at me earnestly with her big obtuse face and her big stupid eyes filled with love and affection. I felt a great uneasiness gather again in my heart

I didn't answer, but there was no need, for Miss Blodgett went on.

'Well !' she said. 'Poor Miss Tate, when she drew up her will, put in a few words as a last message to me. I suppose she wanted to let me see my place in her affections She wanted to let me see how she considered me so close to her And so,' here poor Miss Blodgett forgot for a moment about Miss Tate as she was recalled to the dreadful weeks that had passed, spent mostly in a



*Mary Lavin*

solicitor's office, being questioned and browbeaten, and for a moment she broke down and her poor lower lip fell open, and a tear, that was not for Miss Adeline Tate, but for poor Emma Blodgett, stole down her fat red cheek 'And so,' she said, 'in the will, Miss Tate designated me as her fond niece Emma "And to my fond niece, Emma;" she said, "I hereby leave and bequeath the sum of one thousand pounds"' Miss Blodgett spluttered 'A A A thousand pounds' And to think that I'll never touch a penny of it' She suddenly tucked her handkerchief into her sleeve again, and looked up at the clock on a church tower showing between the high offices The little gold wrist watch she used to wear was not on her arm 'I am on my way down to the solicitor now,' she said. 'I have to go down every other day They're doing their best for me. Lord Robert is most upset. And Miss Lucy Indeed, they all are extremely kind But as for myself, I haven't much hope. You see, it would have been all right if poor Miss Tate had not tried to show me that last mark of affection It would have been all right if she had left the money to Miss Emma Blodgett That was what the solicitor said. "You are Emma Blodgett," he said "But who is this fond niece Emma?" There is no such person. There are fifty-four nieces, counting grandnieces and two great-grand-nieces, but none of them is called Emma' It is perfectly clear, of course, to everyone that it was

### *The Small Bequest*

me that was meant But' — Miss Blodgett's lips trembled again — 'but what good is that to me?' She put out her hand 'I must be going,' she said 'Those solicitors are very exact They don't like to be kept waiting, although, indeed, they think nothing of keeping others waiting I'm often kept waiting an hour up there, and at the end I sometimes have to go away without seeing him, if an urgent call comes on the telephone and he has to go down to the courts But his typist is very nice She always gets me a chair' For an instant she brightened as she held my hand. 'Do you know what I discovered the other day?' she said 'The typist is a niece of Hetty's You remember Hetty? Hetty was always very careful with her money, you know, and she educated all her brother's children They all have good jobs This girl in the solicitor's office is a very well-educated girl She's very civil And she's always very sorry for me if I have to go away without seeing the solicitor "Don't worry, Emma," she says, "everything will be all right!" She's a very exceptional girl. Her name is Miss Hynes Hetty's name was Hynes, you know'

I had almost forgotten to ask about Hetty

'And how is Hetty?' I asked

'Oh, Hetty is all right,' said Miss Blodgett. 'She's gone to live with her brother. They're glad to have her, of course; she has a nice nest egg saved And then, of course, Miss Tate left her a nice little sum too'

*Mary Lavin*

'And Hetty got it all right?' I asked

Miss Blodgett's big, stupid blue eyes were turned on me in swift surprise

'Why, of course!' she said 'Why wouldn't she get it?' It was left to Hester Hynes That was Hetty's right name Hetty was nothing to Miss Tate! Miss Tate had no special feelings for Hetty She just mentioned her name as a matter of course'. Miss Blodgett had risen again for a moment to the height of the old days Her bosom swelled Her eye gleamed 'Hetty was only a servant!' she said 'She was nothing to Aunt Adeline!'

'Well, I must be going, my dear,' said Miss Blodgett 'Sometimes, you know, I get tired of going up to the solicitor's, but I say to myself that Miss Tate will never rest in her grave until I have made the last possible effort to rectify her mistake' She put out her hand 'Good-bye, my dear!' she said 'Thank you for your sympathy I'll let you know how things turn out.'

She turned away then, and I saw that the tears had gathered again in her eyes I heard her mutter something to herself as I stood looking after the blue dress, and the ample ankles in the blue woollen socks. I couldn't be sure, but I think what I heard was a sigh and an exclamation.

'Poor Aunt Adeline! Poor Aunt Adeline!'

# *Mrs. Fortescue*

DORIS LESSING

THAT autumn he became conscious all at once of a lot of things he had never thought about before.

Himself, for a start.

His parents . . . whom he found he disliked, because they told lies. He discovered this when he tried to communicate to them something of his new state of mind and they pretended not to know what he meant.

His sister who, far from being his friend and ally, 'like two peas in a pod' — as people had been saying for years — seemed positively to hate him.

And Mrs Fortescue

Jane, seventeen, had left school and went out every night. Fred, sixteen, loutish schoolboy, lay in bed and listened for her to come home, kept company by her imaginary twin self, invented by him at the end of summer. The tenderness of this lovely girl redeemed him from the shame, the squalor, the misery of his loneliness. Meanwhile, the parents ignorantly slept, not caring about the frightful battles their son was fighting with himself not six yards off. Sometimes Jane came home

*Doris Lessing*

first, sometimes Mrs Fortescue Fred listened to her going up over his head, and thought how strange he had never thought about her before, knew nothing about her

The family lived in a small flat over the liquor shop that Mr and Mrs Danderlea had been managing for Sanko and Duke for twenty years Above the shop, from where rose, day and night, a sickly, inescapable reek of beer and spirits, were the kitchen and the lounge. This layer of the house (it had been one once) was felt as an insulating barrier against the smell, but it reached up into the bedrooms above Two bedrooms — the mother and father in one, while for years brother and sister had shared a room, until recently Mr Danderlea had put up a partition making two tiny boxes, giving at least the illusion of privacy for the boy and the girl

On the top floor, the two rooms were occupied by Mrs Fortescue, and had been since before the Danderleas came Ever since the boy could remember, grumbling went on that Mrs. Fortescue had the part of the house where the liquor smell did not reach, though she, if remarks to this effect came to her, claimed that on hot nights she could not sleep for the smell But on the whole relations were good. The Danderleas' energies were claimed by buying and selling liquor, while Mrs. Fortescue went out a lot. Sometimes another old woman came to visit her, and an old man, small, shrunken

*Mrs Fortescue*

and polite, came to see her most evenings, very late indeed, often after twelve

Mrs Fortescue seldom went out during the day, but left every evening at about six, wearing furs a pale, shaggy coat in winter, and in summer a stole over a costume. She always had a small hat on, with a veil that was drawn tight over her face and held with a bunch of flowers where the fur began. The furs changed often. Fred remembered half a dozen blonde fur coats, and a good many little animals biting their tails or dangling bright bead eyes and empty paws. From behind the veil, the dark made-up eyes of Mrs Fortescue had glimmered at him for years, and her small, old, reddened mouth had smiled.

One evening he postponed his homework, and slipped out past the shop where his parents were both at work, and took a short walk that led him to Oxford Street. The exulting, fearful loneliness that surged through his blood with every heartbeat, making every stamp of shadow a reminder of death, each gleam of light a promise of his extraordinary future, drove him around and around the streets, muttering to himself, bringing tears to his eyes, or to his lips snatches of song which he had to suppress. For, while he knew himself to be crazy, and supposed he must have been all his life (he could no longer remember himself before this autumn), this was a secret he intended to keep for himself and the tender creature who shared the

*Doris Lessing*

stuffy box he spent his nights in. Turning a corner probably (he would not have been able to say) already turned several times before that evening, he saw a woman walking ahead of him in a great fur coat that shone under the street lights, a small veiled hat, and with tiny sharp feet that took tripping steps towards Soho. Recognizing Mrs Fortescue, a friend, he ran forward to greet her, relieved that this frightening trap of streets was to be shared. Seeing him, she first gave him a smile never offered him before by a woman, then looked prim and annoyed, then nodded at him briskly and said as she always did 'Well, Fred, and how are things with you?' He walked a few steps with her, said he had to do his homework, heard her old woman's voice say 'That's right, son, you must work, your mum and dad are right, a bright boy like you, it would be a shame to let it go to waste,' — and watched her move on, across Oxford Street, into the narrow streets beyond.

He turned and saw Bill Bates coming toward him from the hardware shop, just closing. Bill was grinning, and he said 'What, wouldn't she have you then?'

'It's Mrs Fortescue,' said Fred, entering a new world between one breath and the next, just because of the tone of Bill's voice.

'She's not a bad old tart,' said Bill. 'Bet she wasn't pleased to see you when she's on the job.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Fred, trying out a new

*Mrs Fortescue*

man-of-the-world voice for the first time, 'she lives over us, doesn't she?' (Bill must know this, everyone must know it, he thought, feeling sick) 'I was just saying hullo, that's all' It came off, he saw, for now Bill nodded and said 'I'm off to the pictures, want to come?'

'Got to do homework,' said Fred, bitter

'Then you've got to do it then, haven't you,' said Bill reasonably, going on his way

Fred went home in a seethe of shame How could his parents share their house with an old tart (whore, prostitute — but these were the only words he knew), how could they treat her like an ordinary decent person, even better (he understood, listening to them in his mind's ear, that their voices to her held something not far from respect), how could they put up with it? Justice insisted that they had not chosen her as a tenant, she was the company's tenant, but at least they should have told Sanko and Duke so that she could be evicted and . .

Although it seemed as if his adventure through the streets had been as long as a night, he found when he got in that it wasn't yet eight, and his mother said no more than that he shouldn't forget his homework

He went up to his box and set out his school-books. Through the ceiling-board he could hear his sister moving There being no door between the rooms, he went out to the landing, through his parents' room (his sister had to creep past the sleep-



*Doris Lessing*

ing pair when she came in late) and into hers. She stood in a black slip before the glass, making up her face. 'Do you mind?' she said daintily. 'Can't you knock?' He muttered something and felt a smile come on his face, aggressive and aggrieved, that seemed to switch on automatically these days if he even saw his sister at a distance. He sat on the edge of her bed. 'Do you *mind*?' she said again, moving away from him some black underwear. She slipped over her still puppy-fatted white shoulders a new dressing-gown in cherry-red and buttoned it up primly before continuing to work lipstick on to her mouth.

'Where are you going?'

'To the pictures, if you've got no objection,' she chipped out, in this new, jaunty voice that she had acquired when she left school, and which, he knew, she used as a weapon against all men. *But why against him?* He sat, feeling the ugly grin apparently painted on his face, for he couldn't remove it, and he looked at the pretty girl with her new hair-do, putting thick black rings around her eyes, and he thought of how they had been two peas in a pod. *In the summer* . yes, that is how it seemed to him now, through a year's long summer of visits to friends, the park, the zoo, the pictures, they had been friends, allies, then the dark came down suddenly and in the dark had been born this cool, flip girl who hated him.

'Who are you going with?'

*Mrs Fortescue*

'Jem Taylor, if you don't have any objection,' she said

'Why should I have any objection? I just asked'

'What you don't know won't hurt you,' she said, very pleased with herself because of her ease in this way of talking. He recognized his recent achievement in the exchange with Bill as the same step forward as she was making, with this tone, or style, and, out of a quite uncustomary feeling of equality with her, asked 'How is old Jem? I haven't seen him for ages'

'Oh Fred, I'm *late*' This bad temper meant she had finished her face and wanted to put on her dress, which she would not do in front of him

Silly-cow, he thought, grinning and thinking of her alter ego, the girl of his nights, does she think I don't know what she looks like in a slip, or even less? Because of what went on behind the partition, in the dark, he banged his fist on it, laughing, and she whipped about and said 'Oh Fred, you drive me crazy, you really do' This being something from their brother-and-sister-past, admitting intimacy, even the possibility of real equality, she checked herself, put on a sweet contained smile, and said 'If you don't *mind*, Fred, I want to get dressed'

He went out, remembering only as he got through the parents' room and saw his mother's feathered mules by the bed, that he had wanted to talk about Mrs. Fortescue. He realized his ab-

*Doris Lessing*

surdity, because of course his sister would pretend she didn't understand what he meant his fixed smile of shame changed into one of savagery as he thought Well, Jem, you're not going to get anything out of her but *do you mind and have you any objection and please yourself*, I know that much about my sweet sister In his room he could not work, even after his sister had left, slamming three doors and making so much racket with her heels that the parents shouted at her from the shop He was thinking of Mrs Fortescue But she was old She had always been old, as long as he could remember And the old women who came up to see her in the afternoons, were they whores (tarts, prostitutes, *bad women*) too? And where did she, they, do it? And who was the nasty, smelly old man who came so late nearly every night?

He sat with the waves of liquor smell from the ground floor rising past him, thinking of the sourish smell of the old man, and of the scented smell of the old woman, feeling short-breathed because of the stuffy reek of this room and associating it (because of certain memories from his nights) with the reek from Mrs Fortescue's room which he could positively smell from where he sat, so strongly did he create it

Bill must be wrong she couldn't possibly be on the game still, who would want an old thing like that?

*Mrs Fortescue*

The family had a meal every night when the shop closed. It was usually about ten-thirty when they sat down. Tonight there was some boiled bacon, and baked beans. Fred brought out casually 'I saw Mrs Fortescue going off to work when I came out.' He waited the results of this cheek, this effrontery, watching his parents' faces. They did not even exchange glances. His mother pushed tinted bronze hair back with a hand that had a stain of grease on it, and said 'Poor old girl, I expect she's pleased about the Act, when you get down to it, in the winter it must have been bad sometimes.' The words, *the Act* hit Fred's outraged sense of propriety anew, he had to work them out, thinking that his parents did not even apologize for the years of corruption. Now his father said (his face inflamed, he must have been taking nips often from the glass under the counter), 'Once or twice, when I saw her on Frith Street before the Act I felt sorry for her. But I suppose she got used to it.'

'It must be nicer this way,' said Mrs Danderlea, pushing the crusting remains of the baked beans towards her husband.

He scooped them out of the dish with the edge of his fried bread, and she said 'What's wrong with the spoon?'

'What's wrong with the bread?' he returned, with an unconvincing whisky glare, which she ignored.

*Doris Lessing*

'Where's her place, then ?' asked Fred, casual, having worked out that she must have one

'Over that new club in Pantton Street The rent's gone up again, so Mr Spencer told me, and there's the telephone she needs now, well I don't know how much you can believe of what *he* says, but he's said often enough that without him helping her out she'd do better at almost anything. else '

'Not a word he says,' said Mr Danderlea, pushing out his big whisky stomach as he sat back, replete 'He told me he was doorman for the Greystock Hotel in Knightsbridge, well it turns out all this time he's been doorman for that strip-tease joint along the street from her new place, and that's where he's been for years, because it was a night-club before it was strip-tease '

'Well there's no point in that, is there ?' said Mrs Danderlea, pouring second cups 'I mean, why tell fibs about it, I mean everyone knows, don't they ?'

Fred again pushed down protest that yes, Mr Spencer (Mrs Fortescue's 'regular', but he had never understood what they had meant by the ugly word before) was right to lie , he wished his parents would lie even now ; anything rather than this casual back-and-forth chat about this horror, years-old, and right over their heads, part of their lives, inescapable.

He ducked down his face and shovelled beans

*Mrs Fortescue*

into it fast, knowing it was scarlet, and wanting a reason for it

‘You’ll get heart-burn, gobbling like that,’ said his mother, as he had expected

‘I’ve got to finish my homework,’ he said, and bolting, shaking his head at the cup of tea she was pushing over at him

He sat in his room until his parents went to bed, marking off the routine of the house from his new knowledge After an expected interval Mrs Fortescue came in, he could hear her moving about, taking her time about everything Water ran, for a long time He now understood that this sound, water running into and then out of a basin, was something he had heard at this hour all his life He sat listening with the ashamed, fixed grin on his face Then his sister came in, he could hear her sharp sigh of relief as she flumped on the bed and bent over to take off her shoes He nearly called out ‘Good-night, Jane’, but thought better of it Yet all through the summer they had whispered and giggled through the partition

Mr Spencer, her regular, came up the stairs He heard their voices together, listened to them as he undressed and went to bed, as he lay wakeful; as he at last went off to sleep, feeling savage with loneliness

Next evening he waited until Mrs. Fortescue went out, and followed her, careful she didn’t see him She walked fast and efficiently, like a woman

*Doris Lessing*

on her way to the office, not looking at people. Why then the fur coat, the veil, the make-up? Of course, it was habit, because of all the years on the pavement, for it was a sure thing she didn't wear that outfit to receive customers in her place. But it turned out that he was wrong. Along the last hundred yards before her door, she slowed her pace, took a couple of quick glances left and right for the police, then looked at a large elderly man coming towards her. This man swung around, joined her, and they went side by side into her doorway, the whole operation so quick, so smooth, that even if there had been a policeman all he could have seen was a woman meeting someone she had expected to meet.

Fred then went home. Jane was dressing for the evening. He followed her too. She walked fast, not looking at people, her smart new coat flaring jade, emerald, dark green, as she moved through varying depths of light, her black puffy hair gleaming. She went into the underground. He followed her down the escalators, and on to the platform, at not much more than arm's distance, but quite safe because of her self-absorption. She stood on the edge of the platform, staring across the rails at a big advertisement. It was a very large dark-brown gleaming revolver holster, with a revolver in it, attached to a belt for bullets, but instead of bullets each loop had a lipstick, in all the pink-orange-scarlet-crimson shades it was possible to imagine lipstick in. Fred stood just behind his

*Mrs. Fortescue*

sister, and examined her sharp little face examining the advertisement and choosing which lipstick she would buy. She smiled — nothing like the appealing shame-faced smile that was stuck, for ever it seemed, on Fred's face, but a calm, triumphant smile. The train came streaming in, obscuring the advertisement. The doors slid open, receiving his sister, who did not look around. He stood close against the window, looking at her calm little face, willing her to look at him. But the train rushed her off again, and she would never know he had been there.

He went home, the ferment of his craziness breaking through his lips in an incredulous raw mutter: a revolver, a bloody revolver. His parents were at supper, taking in food, swilling in tea, like pigs, pigs, pigs, he thought, shovelling down his own supper to be rid of it. Then he said 'I left a book in the shop, Dad, I want to get it,' and went down dark stairs through the sickly rising fumes. In a drawer under the till was a revolver which had been there for years, against the day when burglars broke in and Mr. (or Mrs.) Danderlea frightened them off with it. Many of Fred's dreams had been spun around that weapon. But it was broken somewhere in its black-gleaming interior. He carefully hid it under his sweater, and went up, to knock on his parents' door. They were already in bed, a large double bed at which, because of this hideous world he was now a citizen of, he was afraid to



*Doris Lessing*

look Two old people, with sagging faces and bulging mottled fleshy shoulders lay side by side, looking at him 'I want to leave something for Jane,' he said, turning his gaze away from them He laid the revolver on Jane's pillow, arranging half a dozen lipsticks of various colours as if they were bullets coming out of it His parents' bedroom was in darkness. His father was snoring and his mother did not answer his good-night

He went back to the shop Under the counter stood the bottle of Black and White beside the glass stained sour with his father's tipping He made sure the bottle was still half-full before turning the lights out and settling down to wait Not for long When he heard the key in the lock he set the door open wide so Mrs. Fortescue must see him

'Why, Fred, whatever are you doing?'

'I noticed Dad left the light on, so I came down' Frowning with efficiency, he looked for a place to put the whisky bottle, while he rinsed the dirtied glass Then casual, struck by a thought, he offered 'Like a drink, Mrs Fortescue?' In the dim light she focussed, with difficulty, on the bottle 'I never touch the stuff, dear.' Bending his face down past hers, to adjust a wine bottle, he caught the liquor on her breath, and understood the vagueness of her good nature.

'Well all right, dear,' she went on, 'just a little one to keep you company. You're like your Dad, you know that?'

'Is that so ?' He came out of the shop with the bottle under his arm, shutting the door behind him and locking it. The stairs glimmered dark. 'Many's the time he's offered me a nip on a cold night, though not when your mother could see.' She added a short triumphant titter, resting her weight on the stair-rail as if testing it.

'Let's go up,' he said insinuatingly, knowing he would get his way, because it had been so easy this far. He was shocked it was so easy. She should have said 'What are you doing out of bed at this time ?' Or 'A boy of your age, drinking, what next !'

She obediently went up ahead of him, pulling herself up.

The small room she went into, vaguely smiling her invitation he should follow, was crammed with furniture and objects, all of which had the same soft glossiness of her clothes, which she now went to the next room to remove. He sat on an oyster-coloured satin sofa, looked at bluish brocade curtains, a cabinet full of china figures, thick, creamy rugs, pink cushions, pink-tinted walls. A table in a corner held photographs. Of her, so he understood, progressing logically back from those he could recognize to those that were inconceivable. The earliest was of a girl with yellow collar-bone-length curls, on which perched a top-hat. She wore a spangled bodice, in pink, pink satin pants, long black lace stockings, white gloves, and was roguishly

*Doris Lessing*

pointing a walking-stick at the audience — at him, Fred ‘Like a bloody gun,’ he thought, feeling the shameful derisive grin come on to his face. He heard the door shut behind him, but did not turn, wondering what he would see. He never had seen her, he realized, without hat, veil, furs. She said, pottering about behind his shoulder ‘Yes, that’s me when I was a Gaiety Girl, a nice outfit, wasn’t it?’

‘Gaiety Girl?’ he said, protesting, and she admitted ‘Well that was before your time, wasn’t it?’

The monstrousness of this second *wasn’t it*, made it easy for him to turn and look. She was bending over a cupboard, her back to him. It was a back whose shape was concealed by thick, soft, cherry-red, with a tufted pattern of whirls and waves. She stood up and faced him, displaying, without a trace of consciousness at the horror of the fact, his sister’s dressing-gown. She carried glasses and a jug of water to the central table that was planted in a deep pink rug, and said ‘I hope you don’t mind my getting into something comfortable, but we aren’t strangers.’ She sat opposite, having pushed the glasses towards him, as a reminder that the bottle was still in his hand. He poured the yellow, smelling liquid, watching her face to see when he must stop. But her face showed nothing, so he filled her tumbler half-full. ‘Just a splash, dear . . .’ He splashed, and she lifted the glass and held it, in the vague tired way that went with

*Mrs. Fortescue*

her face, which, now that for the first time in his life he could look at it, was an old, shrunken face, with small black eyes deep in their sockets, and a small mouth pouting out of a tired mesh of lines. This old, rather kind face, at which he tried not to stare, was like a mask held between the cherry-red gown over a body whose shape was slim and young, and the hair, beautifully tinted a tactful silvery-blond and waving softly into the hollows of an ancient neck

‘My sister’s got a dressing-gown like that ’

‘It’s pretty isn’t it ? They’ve got them in at Richard’s, down the street, I expect she got hers there too, did she ?’

‘I don’t know ’

‘Well the proof of the pudding’s in the eating, isn’t it ?’

At this remark, which reminded him of nothing so much as his parent’s idiotic pattering exchange at supper-time, when they were torpid before sleep, he felt the ridiculous smile leave his face. He was full of anger, but no longer of shame

‘Give me a cigarette, dear,’ she went on, ‘I’m too tired to get up ’

‘I don’t smoke ’

‘If you could reach me my handbag.’

He handed her a large crocodile bag, that she had left by the photographs ‘I have nice things, don’t I ?’ she agreed with his unspoken comment on it ‘Well, I always say, I always have nice

*Doris Lessing*

things, whatever else . I never have anything cheap or nasty, my things are always nice Baby Batsby taught me that, never have anything cheap or nasty, he used to say. He used to take me on his yacht, you know, to Cannes and Nice He was my friend for three years, and he taught me about having beautiful things ' -

'Baby Batsby ?'

'That was before your time, I expect, but he was in all the papers once, every week of the year. He was a great spender, you know, generous.'

'Is that a fact ?'

'I've always been lucky that way, my friends were always generous Take Mr Spencer now, he never lets me want for anything, only yesterday he said Your curtains are getting a bit *passé*, I'll get you some new ones And mark my words, he will, he's as good as his word '

He saw that the whisky, coming on top of whatever she'd had earlier, was finishing her off She sat blinking smeared eyes at him , and her cigarette, secured between thumb and forefinger six inches from her mouth, shed ash on her cherry-red gown She took a gulp from the glass, and nearly set it down on air Fred reached forward just in time

'Mr. Spencer's a good man, you know,' she told the air about a foot from her unfocussed brown gaze.

'Is he ?'

'We're just old friends now, you know. We're

*Mrs Fortescue*

both getting on a bit Not that I don't let him have a bit of a slap and a tickle sometimes to keep him happy, though I'm not interested, not really '

Trying to insert the end of the cigarette inside her fumbling lips, she missed, and jammed the butt against her cheek She leaned forward and stubbed it out Sat back — with dignity Stared at Fred, screwed up her eyes to see him, failed, offered the stranger in her room a social smile

Thus smile trembled into a wrinkled pout, as she said 'Take Mr. Spencer now, he's a good spender, I'd never say he wasn't, but but but ' She fumbled at the packet of cigarettes and he hastened to extract one for her and to light it 'But Yes Well, he may think I'm past it, but I'm not, and don't you think it There's a good thirty years between us, do you know that ?'

'Thirty years,' said Fred, politely, his smile now fixed by a cold determined loathing.

'What do you think, dear ? He always makes out we're the same age, now he's past it, but — well, look at that then if you don't believe me ' She pointed her scarlet-tipped and shaking left hand at the table with the photographs 'Yes, that one, just look at it, it's only from last summer ' Fred leaned forward and lifted towards him the image of her just indicated which, though she was sitting opposite him in the flesh, must prove her victory over Mr. Spencer She wore a full-skirted, tightly-belted, tightly-bodiced striped dress, from which her

*Doris Lessing*

ageing bare arms hung down by her sides, and her old neck and face rose shameless under the beautiful gleaming hair

‘Well it stands to reason, doesn’t it?’ she said, as it were indignant ‘Well what do you think then?’

‘When’s Mr Spencer coming?’ he asked

‘I’m not expecting him to-night, he’s working. I admire him, I really do, holding down that job, three, four in the morning sometimes, and it’s no joke, those layabouts you get at those places, and it’s always Mr Spencer who has to fix them up with what they fancy, if you know what I mean, dear, or get rid of them if they make trouble, and he’s not a big man, and he’s not young any more, I don’t know how he does it But he’s got tact Tact Yes, I often say to him, you’ve got tact, I say, it’ll take a man anywhere’ Her glass was empty, and she was looking at it

The news that Mr Spencer was not expected did not surprise Fred, he had known it, because of his secret brutal confidence born when she had said ‘I never touch the stuff, dear’

He now got up, went behind her, stood a moment steeling himself, because the embarrassed shame-faced grin had come back on to his face, weakening his purpose — then put two hands firmly under her armpits, lifted her and supported her

She at first struggled to remain sitting, but let

*Mrs Fortescue*

herself be lifted 'Time for byebyes?' she said. But as he began to push her, still supporting her, towards the bedroom, she said, suddenly coherent 'But Fred, it's Fred, Fred, it's Fred' She twisted out of his grip, fell two steps back, and was stopped by the door to the bedroom. There she spread her two legs under the cherry gown, to hold her trembling weight, swayed, caught at Fred, held tight, and said 'But it's *Fred*'

'Why should you care,' he said, cold, grinning

'But I don't work here, dear, you know that — no, let me go' For he had put two great schoolboy hands on her shoulders.

He felt the shoulders tense, and then grow small and tender in his palms

'You're like your father, you're the spitting image of your father, did you know that?'

He opened the door with his left hand, then spun her around by pushing at her left shoulder as she faced him, then, putting both hands under her armpits from behind, marched her into the bedroom, while she tittered, steadily

The bedroom was mostly pink. Pink silk bed-spread. Pink walls. A doll in a pink flounced skirt lolled against the pillow, its chin tucked into a white fichu over which it stared at the opposite wall where an eighteenth-century girl held a white rose to her lips. Fred pushed Mrs. Fortescue over dark-red carpet, till her knees met the bed. He lifted her, dropped her on it, neatly moving the doll



*Doris Lessing*

aside with one hand before she could crush it

She lay, eyes closed, limp, breathing fast, her mouth slightly open. The black furrows beside the mouth were crooked, the eyelids shone blue in wells of black

'Turn the lights out,' she tuttered

He turned out the pink-shaded lamp fixed to the head-board. She fumbled at her clothes. He stripped off his trousers, his underpants, pushed her hands aside, found silk in the opening of the gown that glowed cherry-red in the light from the next room. He stripped the silk pants off her so that her legs flew up, then flumped down. She was inert, he fumbled. Then her expertise revived in her, or at least in her tired hands, and he achieved the goal of his hot imaginings of these ugly autumn nights in one shattering spasm that filled him with no less disgust. Her old body stirred feebly under him, and he heard her irregular breathing. He sprang off her in a leap, tugged back pants, trousers. Then he switched on the light. She lay, eyes closed, her face blurred with woe, the upper part of her body nestled into the soft glossy cherry stuff, the white legs spread open, bare. She made an attempt to rouse herself, cover herself. He leaned over her, teeth bared in a hating grin, forcing her hands away from her body. They fell limp on the stained silk spread. Now he stripped off the gown, roughly, as if she were the doll. She whimpered, she tuttered, she protested. He watched, with

*Mrs Fortescue*

pleasure, tears welling out of the pits of dark and trickling crookedly down her face. She lay naked among the folds of cherry-colour. He looked at the grayish crinkles around the armpits, the small flat breasts, the loose stomach, then down, at the triangle of black hair where white hairs sprouted, obscene. She was attempting to fold her legs over each other. He forced them apart again, muttering. Look at yourself, look at yourself then while he held his nausea, deepened by the miasmic smell which he had known was the air of this room. 'Filthy old whore, disgusting, that's what you are, disgusting.' He let his grasp slacken on her thighs, saw red marks come up even as the legs flew together and she wriggled and burrowed to get under the cherry-red gown.

Then she opened her eyes and looked straight up at him. For the first time this evening she looked at him, straight in the eyes. He fell back a step, looking away from her, hearing his own breath coming in gasps of disgust.

She sat up, holding the gown around her — cherry-coloured gown, pink coverlet, pink walls, pink pink pink everywhere and the dark red carpet. He felt as if the whole room flamed with disgust.

'That wasn't very nice, was it?' she said, quavering, but reproachful. Her voice broke in a titter, but she brought her lips together at last and said again. 'That wasn't at all nice, Fred, it wasn't

*Doris Lessing*

nice at all' Without looking at him, she let her feet down (he could see them trembling) over the edge of the bed, and she peered over to fit them into pink-feathered mules

He noted that he had a need to *help* her fit her pathetic feet into the fancy mules, and with a muttered exclamation of horror, fear and shame, he fled out, down the stairs, into his box, where he flung himself face down on the bed Through the ceiling-board an inch from his ear he heard his sister move She had been waiting for him.

She said, low, so the parents couldn't hear, all the flip jauntiness of her voice gone, breathless with accusation and hurt 'Very clever, I *don't* think very clever' She waited, but he did not answer 'I know you're there, don't pretend' He kept silent, waiting for her to tire 'If I was as clever as you I'd go and drown myself, when I saw that gun on my pillow I thought I'd faint, I suppose you think you're just too clever to live.' He waited until she got tired, and he heard her turn over and away from him Then he put the back of his hand against his clenched teeth, and pulled the pillow down over his head so that no one could hear him.

# *Sister Imelda*

EDNA O'BRIEN

THE NEW NUN walked around the convent grounds close to the laurel bushes and in the shade of the trees. She made her circuits with reverently bent head and eyes cast down. It was her first walk and no girl proved impudent enough to waylay her and look up under the black-and-white frame of her gumpe and veil, into her face. My friend Baba Brennan had reported to me that the new nun was tall, but slight, and I had gone into the front grounds to look at her.

The convent where we boarded was on the edge of a small town in the West of Ireland. The fees were low, and there were about eighty girls boarding, as well as a dozen or so day girls from the town.

We had returned from our long summer holiday. The convent, with high stone wall and great green iron gates, enclosed us again, seeming more of a prison than ever — for after our spell in the outside world we all felt very much older, and Baba and I were just that much nearer to final escape. And so, on that damp autumn evening when I first saw the new nun, I thought how she wanted to be alone, fating herself to be cut off

*Edna O'Brien*

with only God    Would I smile at her ?

The next day the new nun, Sister Imelda, came into our class to take geometry. Her pale, slightly long face I saw as quite ordinary at first, though her eyes were blue-black, and she had a strong, pretty mouth.

Our Sister Imelda had spent the last four years — the same span of years that Baba and myself had spent in the convent as pupils — at the University in Dublin. And in time, when we learnt this about her, we felt baffled, unable to understand how she had resisted the temptations of that hectic world we believed existed somewhere 'out there'.

'Something wrong somewhere,' Baba said. 'With make-up she'd be marvellous.'

'She is a holy person,' I said. 'You forget about vocations. Even I might have a vocation.'

'I'll pray for you that you don't,' she said.

It seemed just possible to be a nun within the convent enclosure, with its think-of-nothing white-tiled walls, massive, frightening holy pictures of Christ bleeding in agony on the Cross, crowns of thorns and Sacred Hearts burning in gilt frames in every dark corner. Inside everything stayed for ever the same, like the bacon, the cabbage, the tough meat, the tapioca pudding, and the prayers on the stroke of the bell. Through the windows we saw the mournful conifer trees all around, against the wild, forbidding Irish sky. She was a right saint then, Baba said, having got into a university.

### *Sister Imelda*

for four years for nix, and with hair on her head, to come back to our back of beyond, to poverty, chastity (which we thought meant simply no kissing of boys), and obedience. We visualized scenes of agony in some Dublin hostel, while a boy stood under her bedroom window throwing up clunks of clay, whistles, supplications.

What was even stranger was that Sister Imelda had attended this very convent, before our time, first as a pupil. She had distinguished herself by winning two scholarships, and straight away re-entered our convent as a postulant.

One story was that she had an atrocious temper when a postulant, and once during Christian Knowledge had used the leather strap on two girls. Someone also knew that her brother, a good-looking and famous hurley player, had been sued for breach of promise by some girl.

She was about twenty-five. Baba and I were just sixteen and in our last year at convent school.

Sister Imelda, when she came to our classroom, introduced herself by simply telling us her name and that she was going to take geometry. She talked first in a low voice of how valuable geometry could be to the enlargement of our minds, discipline of thought. One of her eyelids looked red and swollen, as if she were getting a sty. I wondered was she suffering self-mortification by not eating. Mamma said sties and boils were a sure sign of being run down.

*Edna O'Brien*

The new nun absently held a stick of chalk between her first and second finger, as though it were a cigarette. I began to whisper to Baba that she might have been smoking when in Dublin. Sister Imelda looked sharply at me and said that I should pay attention, please. Her dark eyes showed such sudden authority that I prayed she would never have occasion to punish *me*.

The weeks went by. November came and the tiled walls of the recreation hall wept with damp. The gurgling warm-pipe 'central heating' (it lessened the chill if you could sit on a radiator) was not due to be turned on until December — November being the month of the Holy Souls in Purgatory, we were advised to mortify our flesh.

Sister Imelda came quickly to recognize the girls capable of progress at geometry. It was my worst subject. She had not taken more than six or seven classes when she flung a blackboard duster at me in anger, and whitened me with chalk dust. The class became as silent as if everyone had stopped breathing. I went on standing and the nun's face reddened. She patted her eye with a handkerchief, the eye with the sty. It must have been hurting, throbbing. Noiselessly and still red in the face she fled from the room, leaving us ten minutes free until the next class. Had I the courage I would have run after her and said that she could slap me with the strap as long as she did not cry. A sort of speechless tenderness for her came to life in me.

## *Sister Imelda*

Baba said that we could get her into serious trouble, 'Get her defrocked,' Baba said, dusting the chalk from my gym-frock

That evening at chapel, in the dim light from the Benediction candles I discovered a holy picture in my prayer-book Sister Imelda had put it there to atone for her temper, and on the back she had written a verse—

Trust Him when dark doubts assail thee,  
Trust Him when thy faith is small,  
Trust Him when to simply trust Him  
Seems the hardest thing of all

There was no mistaking the fine, flowing handwriting and the green ink she used to correct our exercise books She had located the compartment in the chapel where I kept my prayer-book and the next evening again had placed there for me a leather-bound book of French prayers, with 'For you' in green ink on the flyleaf

When I thanked her, outside the chapel door she bowed, but did not speak Mostly, the nuns were on silence and only talked during class

Soon, I became publicly known as her 'pet' I opened doors for her, raised the blackboard two pegs higher (she was taller than other nuns) and handed out the exercise books which she had corrected. Now, in the margins of my geometry propositions I would find 'Good', or 'Improving', where she used to dash 'Disgraceful'. Baba said it was sneaky being a nun's pet and that any girl



who sucked up to nuns was not to be trusted as a friend

About a month later I carried Sister Imelda's books up four flights of stairs to the cookery kitchen. She taught cookery to a junior class. As she walked ahead of me, up the stone stairs I thought 'How beautifully she walks in her black habit, swinging her beads in her hand as if going to strike someone with them'. On each landing she paused for breath and looked through the long, curtainless window at the street below. Outside two women in suede boots were chatting and smoking as they moved down the street with shopping baskets, inside, the cold air was raw with the smell of Jeyes Fluid. A working nun, kneeling, scrubbed the granite steps with intensity. Sister Imelda bowed to her, passed on, then put her finger in the earth of a potted plant to see if it were moist. I was happy in that stone prison then, happy to be near Sister Imelda, walking behind her as she twirled her beads and bowed to the servile nun. I no longer cried for my mother, or counted the days on a pocket calendar, until the Christmas holidays.

'Come back at five,' my nun said, taking the books on the threshold of the kitchen door.

When I returned an hour later the granite steps were still wet — things took a long while to dry in that place. Our underclothes felt so damp when they came back from the laundry, that I used to keep mine in the bed with me to dry them out.

## *Sister Imelda*

My nun was sitting on the corner of a white, scrubbed table, looking out at the yew trees

'I'd say you have a sweet tooth,' she said, unlocking one of the built-in wall presses and producing two jam tarts that were still warm from the oven

'What will I do with them ?'

'Eat them, you goose,' she said

The smell of warm pastry, the taste of the sweet, sticky jam, gave me such pleasure that I felt we were doing something utterly forbidden. I was a tall girl at sixteen, somewhat grown out of my gym-frock, with thick auburn hair and large eyes in a round, pink face (Baba said that I looked like 'Some kind of mad animal peeping through a hedge'). I looked at my nun and thought how peerless, how beautiful was her straight, aristocratic nose and her pale, thin face. She wore a white overall over her black habit, and it made her warmer and freer in speech, or so I thought.

'Had you a friend when you were in Dublin at University ?' I asked daringly

'I shared a desk with a sister from Howth and stayed in the same hostel,' she said.

'But what about boys ?' I thought, 'and what of your life now and do you long to go out into the world ?' But could not say it

We knew something about the nuns' routine. It was rumoured that they wore itchy, wool underwear, ate dry bread for breakfast, rarely had meat, cakes or dainties, kept certain hours of strict silence

*Edna O'Brien*

with each other, as well as constant vigil on their thoughts, so that if their minds wandered to the subject of food or pleasure they would quickly revert to thoughts of God and their eternal souls. They slept on hard beds with rough sheets and black blankets. At four o'clock in the morning while we slept, each nun got out of bed in her habit — which was also her death habit — and, chanting, flocked down the wooden stairs to fling themselves on the tiled floor of the cold, unlit chapel. Each nun — even the Mother Superior — flung herself in total submission and said Latin prayers, offering up the day to God. Then, silently back to their cells for one more hour of rest. It was not easy to imagine Sister Imelda face downwards, arms outstretched, prostrate on the tiled floor.

I often heard their chanting when I wakened suddenly from a nightmare, because, although we slept in a different building, both adjoined and if one wakened for a moment one heard that monotonous chanting, long before the birds began, long before our own bell summoned us to rise at six.

'Do you eat nice food?' I asked.

'Of course,' she said and smiled. She sometimes broke into an eager smile which she did much to conceal.

'Have you ever thought of what you will be?' she asked.

I shook my head. My hopes changed from day to day.

## *Sister Imelda*

She looked at her man's silver pocket watch, closed the damper of the range and prepared to leave. She checked that all the wall presses were locked by running her hand over them.

'Sister,' I called, gathering enough courage at last. We must have some secret, something to join us together, 'What colour hair have you?'

We never saw the nuns' hair, or their eyebrows, or ears, as all that part was covered by a stiff, white gumpe.

'You shouldn't ask such a thing,' she said, getting pink in the face, and then she turned back and whispered, 'I'll tell you on your last day here, provided your geometry has improved.'

She had scarcely gone when Baba, who had been lurking behind some pillar, stuck her head in the door and said, 'Christ sake save me a bit.' She finished the second pastry, then went around looking in kitchen drawers. Because of everything being locked she found only some castor sugar in a china shaker. She ate a little and threw the remainder into the dying fire so that it flared up for a minute with a yellow flame. Baba showed her jealousy by putting it around the school that I was in the cookery kitchen every evening, gorging cakes with Sister Imelda and telling the shameful things which girls said about nuns and nuns' bosoms and things. The girls began to distrust me from then on.

I did not speak to Sister Imelda again privately

*Edna O'Brien*

until the Christmas concert, when she came to paint our faces and help us into our stage clothes. We were doing scenes from *Julius Caesar*. As Mark Antony I had been instructed by the head-nun to wear a purple nightdress, white knee-length socks and buckled shoes. Ten minutes before the curtain went up, I panicked because the socks were too tight and the nightdress too big. Calm Sister Imelda found a sequined belt for my waist, and tickled the soles of my bare feet as she stretched the shrunken socks, and got them on me somehow.

'It's the dye,' I said anxiously. My feet were black from the dye of my new cotton stockings and I worried that she might think I had not washed my feet. We bathed our feet twice weekly in cold water and it is easy to recall the shrieks and murmurs of the girls as their feet sank into the cold basins.

'Of course,' she said, smiling. Was it by accident that a little lipstick brightened her mouth? There was no doubt but that with make-up she would be beautiful.

Baba could say later that I bawled like 'A bloody butcher' as Mark Antony, but Sister Imelda stood in the wings and nodded emotionally during my big speech. That evening, before I left for the Christmas holiday, I gave her two half-pound boxes of chocolates — bought for me by one of the day girls — and she gave me a casket painted with gilt.

### *Sister Imelda*

paint and covered on top with a cluster of minute shells

On the cold, spowgy afternoon four weeks later when we returned from our Christmas holiday, Sister Imelda stole up to the dormitory to welcome me back. All the other girls had gone to the recreation-hall to dance barn dances to piano music. I was still unpacking as she came down the carpeted passage, between the rows of iron beds, without making a sound.

'And you've curled your hair,' she said, offended. I wished that she could have seen me in my blue pinafore frock, but as it was, I was once again wearing my navy gym-frock, navy wool jumper, black stockings and black, flat, laced shoes.

I offered her queen-cakes of Mamma's but she refused them and said she could only stay a second. She lent me a note-book of hers into which, as a pupil, she had written favourite poems and quotations from books that she liked. It had a soft, black leather cover and the pages smelt of carbolic soap. She must have kept it near her soap-dish.

'Are you well?' I asked. She looked pale. It may have been the reflection of the snow, or of the white cotton bedspreads on her face, but she appeared to be suffering. Her face looked more pinched too and her nose stuck out more. And still the same old black shoes, crinkled from years of wear and polishing.

'I've been thinking of you,' she said.

*Edna O'Brien*

'Me too,' I said At home, eating turkey and mince pies, I wished that she could be with us, sharing the fire and the lovely food.

'You know that it is not proper for us to be too friendly,' she said

'Why not ?' I asked She was the only beautiful thing in the convent, she and the altar with its arrangements of fresh flowers, no matter what the season

'Well, we mustn't get attached, it's not right,' she said I could not ask what was not right about it, but I knew that she had never done more than tickle my toes the day of the concert, or shake hands with me before I left for my holidays Nuns had a terrible life, there was no doubt about it

• From then on, she treated me as less of a favourite Reading her note-book helped me over the first, deprived days Into a like note-book I copied her chosen quotations

But some little time later, when she supervised our studying — a different nun supervised each week — I had a smile from her, as she sat on the rostrum, bent over some exercise books. Having a problem with my geometry I plucked up courage and asked for help Patiently she went over the theorem step by step. Standing close to her, and also because her gumpe was crooked, I saw one of her eyebrows for the first time. It was dark and bushy. Looking then at the smears of green ink on two of her fingers I recollected that probably

### *Sister Imelda*

she had never plucked her eyebrows, never thrown bath cubes into a hot bath and lolled in it, never had her hair permed and felt that twinge of piercing cold as the ammonia trickled down her neck. I'd had my first perm that Christmas, but she said that she was pleased to see my hair coming straight again.

As usual, at nine o'clock a tray of warm milk was brought for certain delicate girls. That night it was tepid, and I got the cracked cup. Drinking it slowly I could see specks of dust on the milk and I put it back unfinished. We went on with the private lesson, although now we had gone past geometry and Sister Imelda was telling me about the life of G. K. Chesterton and his absent-mindedness. G. K. Chesterton once put on his trousers backwards. I nearly burst trying to hold in my laughter.

The Mother Superior — a sharp-eyed woman with warts on her right cheek — came in, noiselessly.

'Would you please go back to your desk,' she said, 'And in future, kindly allow Sister Imelda to get on with her duties.'

I tiptoed back to my desk and saw my friendly enemy Baba smile with pleasure. Inspecting the empty milk cups on the aluminium tray the Mother Superior asked what girl had not finished her milk.

'Me, sister,' I said, raising my hand. She made me finish the dusty milk, and stand under the clock for the remainder of the study period as punishment.



*Edna O'Brien*

ment for having 'yelled' with laughter in an 'unladylike' way

For weeks I pined and tried to see my nun by waiting outside doors where I knew she was due. Each time she walked past with a cool nod I wondered if the Mother Superior had asked her not to make such a favourite of me, or if she had decided so, herself. As time went on, she seemed to get more beautiful, the pale face I now saw as something resembling a saint's face carved out of stone, and she walked with such grace that I tried never to walk in front of her and be seen for the awkward lump I was.

It was not until one Sunday morning five weeks later that I had a private word with her.

One day in March the sun came out briefly, the broken clouds sailed across the sky, wind bent the convent trees, and (as a treat!) we were sent up to the playing-fields for a game of rounders, with Sister Imelda in charge. When my turn came to hit the ball with the long, wooden bat I crumbled into a state of panic and ducked, afraid the ball would hit me.

'Little Mo,' said Baba, jeering.

At length Sister Imelda crooked her finger and called me aside. We sat on a wooden bench and she told me that I must not give way to tears when humiliated, that life was a long succession of humiliations, and only through humility could the soul be perfected.

## *Sister Imelda*

‘What will you do when you’re a nun?’ she asked chidingly

I had made up my mind to be a nun, and I felt that she guessed as much

‘When I’m a nun, will my bed be tossed just after I’ve made it, and will I have to eat liver and things I don’t like as a punishment?’ I asked

• ‘You’ll see,’ she said, and slipped a chocolate biscuit into my gym-frock pocket

Walking down from the playing-field to our Sunday lunch of fat roast mutton and cabbage, we all chatted to Sister Imelda. The girls milled around her, linking her arms, trying to hold her hand, counting the various keys on her bunch

‘Sister, did you ever ride a motor bicycle?’

‘Sister, did you ever wear seamless stockings?’

‘Sister, what’s your favourite food?’

‘What do you do when you want to scratch your head?’

‘If you had a wish, what would you choose?’

Yes, she said calmly, she had ridden a motor bicycle, but not worn seamless stockings. She liked bananas best, and if she had a wish it would be to go home for a few hours to see her parents and brother

‘Is he a smasher?’ Baba asked, and got a real wink from the Sister, which made me jealous

At lunch the mutton had a heavy gamey smell, but senior girls had come prepared with old envelopes or pieces of paper. I can still feel the damp

heat from the warm meat as I put it inside my jumper, in order to sneak it out. The junior girls ate theirs diligently and Baba said that their insides would be crawling with maggots. Then, on our Sunday walk through the town and along the edge of the lake, we pulled out our damp lumps and threw them into the water.

After the walk we wrote home. We were allowed to write home once a week, our letters were always censored. I told my mother that I had made up my mind to be a nun, and asked if she could send me bananas, when and if they arrived at our local grocery shop.

That evening, perhaps as I wrote to my mother on the ruled white paper, a telegram arrived which said that Sister Imelda's brother had been killed on his motor bicycle, while on his way home from a hurling match. The Mother Superior announced it, and asked us to pray for his soul and write letters of sympathy to Sister Imelda's parents. We all wrote identical letters, because in our first year at school we had been given specimen letters for various occasions, and we all referred back to our specimen letter of sympathy.

Next day the town hire-car drove up to the convent and Sister Imelda, accompanied by another nun, went home for the funeral. She looked as white as a sheet with eyes redder than ever and a heavy knitted shawl over her shoulders. Although she came back that night (I stayed awake to hear

## *Sister Imelda*

the car) we did not see her for a whole week, except to catch a glimpse of her back, in the chapel

When she resumed class she was peaky and distant, making no reference at all to her recent tragedy

The day the bananas came I waited outside the door and gave her a bunch wrapped in tissue paper. Some were still a little green, and she said that Mother Superior would put them in the glasshouse to ripen. I felt that Sister Imelda would never taste them, they would be kept for a visiting priest or bishop

'Oh, sister, I'm sorry about your brother,' I said, in a burst

'It will come to us all, sooner or later,' Sister Imelda said dolefully.

I dared to touch her wrist to communicate my sadness. She went her way, with dutifully bent head

Lent came and her suffering seemed to increase. Her face showed deathly white, and her eyes were small from crying. She grew irritable and had a boil on her cheek. She asked me to pray for her brother's soul and to avoid seeing her alone. Each time as she came down a corridor towards me I was obliged to turn the other way. Now, Baba or some other girl moved the blackboard two pegs higher and spread her shawl, when wet, over the radiator to dry.

Finally I got 'flu and was put to bed. Sickness

*Edna O'Brien*

took the same bleak course — a cup of hot senna delivered in person by the head-nun who stood there while I drank it, tea at lunch-time with thin slices of brown bread (because it was just after the war food was still rationed, so the butter was mixed with lard and had white streaks running through it and a faintly rancid smell), hours of just lying there surveying the empty dormitory, the empty iron beds with white counterpanes on each one, and convent Crucifixes laid on the white, frilled pillow-slips. I knew that she would miss me and hoped that Baba would tell her where I was. I counted the number of tiles from the ceiling to the head of my bed, thought of my mother at home on the farm mixing hen food, thought of my father, losing his temper perhaps, and stamping on the kitchen floor with nailed boots. I recalled the money owing for my school fees and hoped that Sister Imelda would never get to hear of it. During Christmas holiday I had seen a bill sent by the head-nun to my father which said, 'Please remit this week without fail'. I hated being in bed causing extra trouble and therefore reminding the head-nun of the unpaid liability. We had no clock in the dormitory, no way of guessing the time.

Marigold, one of the servants, came to take off the counterpanes at five and brought with her two gifts from Sister Imelda — an orange, and a little blue medal swinging on a small gold pin. I kept the orange peel in my hand, smelling it, and

### *Sister Imelda*

planning how I would thank her. Thinking of her I fell into a feverish sleep and was wakened when the girls came to bed at ten and switched on the various ceiling lights.

At Easter, Sister Imelda warned me not to give her chocolates so I got her a flash-lamp instead and two spare batteries. Pleased with such a useful gift (perhaps she read poems in bed), she put her arms round me and brushed her cheek against mine. It made up for the seven weeks of withdrawal, and as I drove down the convent drive with Baba she waved to me, as she had promised, from the window of her cell.

On the last term at school studying was intensive because of the State examinations which were to be held in June. Like all the other nuns Sister Imelda thought only of these examinations. She crammed us with knowledge, lost her temper every other day and gritted her teeth whenever the blackboard was too greasy to take the imprint of the chalk. If ever I met her on the corridor she asked if I knew such and such a thing, and coming down from Sunday games she went over various questions with us.

At last the examination day arrived and we sat at single desks supervised by some strange woman from Dublin. Opening a locked trunk she took out the pink examination papers and distributed them around. Geometry was on the fourth day. When we came out from it, Sister Imelda was in the hall

with all the answers, so that we could compare our answers with hers. Then she called me aside and we went up towards the cookery kitchen and sat on the stairs while she went over the paper with me, question for question. I knew that I had three right and two wrong, but did not tell her so.

'It is black,' she said then, rather suddenly. I thought she meant the dark light where we were, sitting.

'It's cool, though,' I said. Summer had come, our white skins baked under the heavy uniform and dark violet pansies bloomed in the convent grounds. Pansies like her eyes. She looked well again and her pale skin was once more unblemished.

'My hair,' she whispered, 'is black.' And she told me how she had spent her last night before entering the convent. She had gone out with a boy on a motor bicycle and ridden for miles, and they'd lost their way up a mountain and she became afraid she would be so late home that she would sleep it out next morning. It was understood between us that I was going to enter the convent in September and that I could have a last fling too. She let me fit on her silver ring — the ring all nuns wore on their marriage fingers.

Two days later we prepared to go home. There were farewells and outlandish promises, and autograph books signed, and girls trudging up the recreation hall, their cases bursting open with clothes.

## *Sister Imelda*

and books Baba scattered biscuit crumbs in the dormitory for the mice, and stuffed all her prayer-books under a mattress Her father promised to collect us at four I had arranged with Sister Imelda secretly, that I would meet her in one of the wooden chalets around the walks, where we would spend our last half-hour together I expected that she would tell me something of what my life as a postulant would be like

But Baba's father came an hour early He had something urgent to do at four, and came at three instead All I could do was ask Marigold to take a note to Sister Imelda I wrote,

Remembrance is all I ask,  
But if remembrance should prove a task,  
Forget me

I hated Baba, hated her busy father, hated the thought of my mother standing in the doorway in her good dress, welcoming me home at last I would have become a nun that minute if I could

I wrote to my nun that night and again next day and then every week for a month Her letters were censored so I tried to convey my feelings indirectly In one of her letters to me (they were allowed one letter a month) she said that she looked forward to seeing me in September. But by September Baba and I had left for the University in Dublin.

I stopped writing to Sister Imelda then, reluctant to tell her that I no longer wished to be a nun.



*Edna O'Brien*

In Dublin we enrolled at the same University as she had attended. I saw her maiden name on a list, for having graduated with special honours, and for days was again sad and remorseful. I rushed out and bought three batteries for the flash-lamp I'd given her, and posted them without any note enclosed. No mention of my missing vocation, no mention of why I had stopped writing.

One Sunday, on a summer afternoon, about two years later, Baba and myself travelled out to Howth on a bus. Howth is a seaside village near Dublin, favoured by students and all sorts of young people. The bus was full of mothers and babies, and older children in charge of younger children, as is found in Dublin, on their way to Dollymount Strand, which is on the way to Howth.

We were both what Baba called dressed up to the nines — red toe-nails, toeless sandals, bottled suntan on our legs, pancake on our faces and thick rims of dark mascara lining our eyes, and almost blinding us.

After a while I thought I smelled nuns in the bus — candles, incense, carbolic soap, camphor and a little of the scrubbed kitchen-table smell. But that would have been impossible on a bus full of poor children? We sat at the front. Whatever made me look around, I saw Sister Imelda and another nun sitting just inside the door at the back. They were looking towards the sea, not talking, but very interested in everything going on

## *Sister Imelda*

around them I held the Sunday paper to the side of my face and said to Baba,

‘Sister Imelda, in the back, keep your face down ’

‘Why ? There’s nothing wrong with us We’ll go back and cut a great dash in front of her ’

‘Oh please, please ! I’ll die if she sees me ’

‘I’ll just take a deck at her and see if she’s changed ’

I gripped her arm and she must have felt me trembling ‘Oh, all right,’ Baba said ‘If you’re going to have a fit just because ’

But she kept her head down We sat silent, while the bus stopped twice

‘Maybe they got off,’ Baba said, and then, ‘What would be the harm if we said hello ?’

I couldn’t explain it. It was as if I had betrayed Sister Imelda by not living as she did.

We passed a convent, and Baba said they might be going there By then I had taken a desperate decision — to conquer myself, to stand up and speak to the person I had loved most in the world, after my mother. With my flushed face I stood up to go to the back of the bus

The nuns had gone, the bus was moving again. I saw the backs of the two black, almost identical figures, on the pavement I ran to the back of the bus, to see them, and see the last of my school-days being left behind.

# *The Speech*

V S PRITCHETT

'It's a funny turn-out You don't know what front to take up for the best,' the chatty doorman replied to the big-bellied woman as he opened the door and let her and the other speakers into the hall.

'You'd better bloody well make your mind up or you'll be dead,' she said to him with a grin over her shoulder as she passed and followed the others up the steps on to the cold, dusty platform. And she said to the young man with heavy fair hair who was next to her when they sat down

'That's this place for you Did you hear him ? It's dead They've had the bomb already.' A man's voice shouted from the audience, just before Lord Birt got up to introduce the speakers

'Good old Sally '

No smile of pleasure moved her double chin, nor did she nod She was counting That one shout echoed It revealed the emptiness of the hall It would hold eight hundred , she had seen in her time twice that number fighting their way in Now (she reckoned it up), there were no more than fifty or sixty

The weather, the sleet whipping across all day

## *The Speech*

(the secretary had said), not having had longer notice, not getting through to headquarters on the phone. A lot of people on short time. Excuses. They had even spelled her name wrong on the notice outside. Sally Proser, leaving out the second 's' and the sleet spitting on it made the red ink run as if the poster was sobbing and ashamed of them all. They couldn't get her name right, even in her own town.

Lord Birt had sat down. The first speaker was up.

'Friends,' he was saying, 'I shall not take up your time.' She looked at her watch.

'We'll be here half the night,' she said to the young man next to her. He was trying to keep a piercing look on his face. 'Who is he?'

'Doctor,' hissed the young man, crossing his legs. 'Quaker. Liberal.'

'God,' she said very audibly.

It was a large hall, a yawning historic fake in a Gothic baronial style, built out of cotton profits a hundred years before, shabbied by hundreds, thousands of meetings, the air staled and exhausted by generations of preachers, mayors and politicians. The damp had brought out a smell made of floor boards, the municipal disinfectants, the sweet, sooty cellulose effluence of the city. It was a smell provided by a dozen mills whose tall chimneys pencilled the pink fume of the sky, something of the fouled milky green industrial river and the oily

canal A mist hung across the middle of the hall like breath left behind for years, and although all the chandeliers were lighted, the light fell yellowish and weak on the audience sitting in their overcoats in the first five rows and on the long funereal stretch of empty chairs behind One person after another turned round in discomfort, looking at the distant glass doors at the back and then at the side, to see where the Arctic draught came from, and then, reproaching themselves, lifted their chins stiffly and stared with increasing resentment at the platform Up there, the doctor was still going on. He was a tall, very thin man, vain of his eagle face, his waving silken white hair, his gentle high-pitched doubting vocables They were moving equably out of 'the situation before all of us today', then went on derisively to 'the international plane' and 'the lessons of history' (his past), to what he had said 'in this very hall' (references to local elections thirty years ago), and emerged into the benignancy of the 'moral issue' and circled impatiently to what he had 'always said' Beside him sat young Lord Birt, ace flyer, Matisse owner, lecturer in America, with a new political career in his dark prompt electric black moustache, and next to him the young man 'It's a scandal, a meeting like this,' Mrs Prosser was saying to him audibly through the doctor's speech 'I'll take it up with headquarters Where have they put you up — in an hotel? I was out last night, God knows where,

## *The Speech*

in the treasurer's house, and there's been a death in the family. Imagine the atmosphere.'

'Someone just died?' said the young man, astonished.

'Twenty-five years ago!' she said sarcastically. 'I've made fourteen speeches on this tour, in the last six days, and they hadn't the decency to put me into an hotel. It's all wrong.' And Mrs Prosser's chins, mouth and jaws, even her big breasts, seemed to gather themselves together until she looked like a fist.

'What about Hungary?' shouted a man from the audience.

'Yes, what about Hungary?' shouted two or three others.

'They're waking up,' said the young man.

'I'm glad you asked me that question,' said the doctor, going on.

'No, it's nothing,' she said, giving an experienced glance at the shouters. 'They're dead. How did you get here? They didn't even have a car, borrowed it from the treasurer's son, it broke down. We sat on the road for half an hour, on a night like this. Ah, well, the old bastard is drying up. It's you.'

The young man got up.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,' he began.

(Oh God, thought Mrs. Prosser, but forgave him.) He had learned his speech, he was sawing it off, it fell in lumps to the floor. The women

looked sympathetic, the men looked ironical, one or two of the shouters leaned forward to egg him on at first, and then leaned back, with their hands on their knees, giving up. Handsome, his hair flopping, he seemed to have some invisible opponent in front of him whom he was angrily trying to push away, so that he could see the audience. He struggled and at last he stopped struggling. He came to an end, looked back nervously to see if his chair was still there, and when the audience clapped he looked back at them with suspicion and anger.

'I made a mess of it,' he murmured to Mrs. Prosser.

'Here we go,' Mrs. Prosser ignored him. 'Watch me, if I don't wet my drawers before I've done with this bloody lot.'

She was up, adroitly slipping her old fur coat off her shoulders and into the hands of the young man, stepping in one stride to the edge of the platform. She stared at the audience, let them have a good look at her. She was a short woman of forty-seven. Robust. She was wearing a tan jumper that was low on her strong neck and pulled on anyhow, and a shabby green skirt. She had big heavy breasts, which she had been ashamed of in her young days, wanting to hide them, but that was before she joined the Movement, a stout belly, hard as a drum, which made her laugh when she got up in the morning. Her face was round and

## *The Speech*

she had a double chin and the look on her face said 'Go on ! Take a good look It's your last chance ' Suddenly she let out her voice

'Fellow workers,' she shouted The words, slow, deep and swinging in delivery, rocked them They stopped fidgeting and coughing She heard with pleasure her full plain northern voice sweep out over them and to the back of the hall, filling it to the baronial beams and spreading over the seats and into the empty galleries

'Good old Sally,' shouted a man

'Come on, Sally,' shouted another, wet-lipped with love at the sight of her and nudging his neighbour She paused in the middle of her sentence and smiled fully at him — the first broad smile of the night

She loved these opening minutes of her speeches I'm an old potato, she thought, but my hair is brown and alive and I've got a voice I can do anything with it. It was as powerful as a man's, yet changeable. Now it was soft, now violent, riotous in argument yet simple, always firm and disturbing It could be blunt and brutal and yet it throbbed. It had sloshed its way through strikes and mass meetings, it had rebounded off factory walls, it had romped and somersaulted over thousands of heads. It had rung bitterly out through the Spanish Civil War, when she was a young woman, through the rows of the Second Front, the Peace Campaigns, the Hungarian quarrel; it was all out



*V S Pritchett*

now for Banning the Tests It had never worn out, never coarsened, never aged, in these first few minutes it was her blood, the inner, spontaneous fountain of her girlhood, something virginal she would never lose At every meeting it was reborn

Even her shrewd brown eyes were bemused by the utter pleasure of hearing this voice, so that each of her early sentences surprised her by their clarity and the feeling that was in them, she was proud to feel her lungs heave, to watch the next thought form in her brain, the next argument assemble, the words, the very vowels and consonants fall into place. It was thrilling to pause and throw in a joke, a flash of hate or a line of wit that would sometimes recklessly jump into her head and make it itch with pleasure This was the moment when she caught the crowd, played with them and made them hers It was the time, for her, of consciousness, like a sudden falling in love, when the eyes of the audience answered her signals, when she could look carelessly from face to face, watching her words flick like angler's line over them, looking for the defaulter And, picking this man or this woman out, she would pause, as it were, to ask the audience to watch her make her catch, as if she had come down off the platform to be among them with an intimacy that teased them and made their minds twist and flick and curl with fear and pleasure.

## *The Speech*

And then — it happened, the break, almost painful for her. The virginal voice that was so mysteriously herself, would separate from her and perform alone as if it had nothing to do with her at all. It became simply, the voice. It left her, a plain, big-bellied, middle-aged woman, a body, to stand there exposed in all the woundedness of her years while it went off like some trained dog, barking round the audience, fetching in some stray from the back, flinging itself against the rows of empty chairs.

‘And I say and I say again we’ve got to stop these tests!’ We tell the Americans to stop these tests. We tell the Russians to stop these tests. We tell this Tory government that if it does not stop these tests . . .’

Now it was barking down derisively from the gallery at the end of the hall, barking at the City Arms, at fire extinguishers, at the Roll of Honour in gold, at the broom left by the cleaner, at the draught coming in at the doors, it was barking round walls below and the feet of the audience.

The light went out of Mrs Prosser’s face. She let the voice carry on and she looked with boredom at the people. There was the elderly man, deaf and impatient; there was the big married woman with folded arms who kept glancing down her row to see everyone was listening, like a policewoman. There were the two girls, shoulder to shoulder, with pretty false faces, waiting for a chance to whisper.

There was a woman with mouth open, ravenous, as if she were going to rush the platform and kiss her. There were the threes or fours of men frosted with self-respect. There was the man who seemed, nowadays, to come to all her meetings, a man neither young nor old, listening with one ear and sly, who sat at the end of a row with one bent leg sticking out of the neat block of the audience and who glanced often at the side door, as if he were waiting his chance for a sign, to make a bolt for it. For what? For the pubs before they closed, for the last tram, to meet someone, even just to stand in the street — why? Had he got — a life? It always troubled her. She wanted to follow him. And there was that swing door which kept gulping like a sob, as someone pushed in, gave a glance at the meeting and then went out and the door gave another gulp like the noise of a wash-basin as if all the words of that voice of hers were going down a drain.

‘For you can take it from me, if the Americans don’t stop these tests, if the Russians don’t stop these tests, if the Tory party just sits on its bum .’

Loud cheers. That was a word for the north. Mrs Prosser grinned at the joke. She had a good big bum herself.

The voice went on. It carried nearly thirty years of the life. At a meeting like this — no, not like this, but much larger and in the open streets, in the Blackshirt days, she had met her husband.

## *The Speech*

There was a shouting, arm-wrenching, tearing, kicking fight with the police. What solid lumps their bodies were! She (when she remembered it) had felt as light as air. A gale had lifted her suddenly so that she, like the rest of the scattering and re-forming crowd, was blown about and with a force in her big arms and body that was exalted. Bodies swung about like sacks of meal. The houses and all their windows seemed to buckle and bulge towards her, the cobbled street heaved up and down like a sea. You could pick up the street in your hands. A young man near her gave a shout and she shouted, too, and her shout was his and his was hers, for an extraordinary few moments they had the same body. A policeman struck at the young man, the blow fell on his neck and she felt the pain. She could not remember how — but she was clawing at the policeman and the young man's blood struck her cheek. They spent that night in prison.

The pupil teacher at the Adderdale Road School (Girls) to be in prison! That was when the hate started — her mother saying she would never hold her head up again, they had always been decent people. The father saying 'All stuck-up with those books and too good for her own family, and now she has disgraced us.' If young Prosser, the little weed, came round the house again — the father said — he'd belt him. In this very city They sacked her from the school. From that time her life had been committees, lectures, meetings

Always travelling, always on platforms, her husband at one end of the country and she at the other. He with the shout on his face and she with the shout on hers, a drawing back of the lips over the teeth that was their love, too. Love a shout, marriage a shout. They saw each other for an hour or two, or a day or two, eating anything, anywhere, usually a sandwich or a few bars of chocolate. It was the chocolate that had made her put on weight. 'I'm a fighting sweet-shop.' At first, he had been the nimble one, the leader, wearing himself out and often ill, he had the ideas, then, one week, when he was sick with an ulcer, she had taken a meeting — and the voice, this strange being inside her came out and now it was she who not only commanded him, but audiences by the hundred, the thousands. The voice took over her life and her husband's, too.

And they stuck me out at a place nine miles outside this city (her body, her bullying breasts and affronted belly were saying), in weather like this! I don't say I wasn't comfortable. That'd be a lie. I was glad to see a coal fire and the tea was better than that slop they gave us at Lord Birt's this afternoon. Three-piece suite too and the telly on, very nice. You wouldn't have seen that in our home when I was a girl. We had a laugh too about Lord Birt's house, all those chimneys. Mrs Jenkins was a maid there when she was a girl and they used to bless those chimneys. My husband and I did our courting up there in the woods above. Mrs Jenkins

## *The Speech*

and I had a good laugh about old times And then the old lady, Mrs Jenkins's mother, got restless 'Eh,' says Mrs Jenkins, 'Mother wants her telly We turned it off when you came She sits there in front of it, tapping her toes on the floor when the cowboys go by, rocking up and down' 'You want to get on your horse and ride the range, Gran, don't you?' says Harry Jenkins, the lad 'Gran's in her saddle, reaching for her gun when the Westerns come on She gets excited, don't you, Gran?' Of course, the old lady was stone deaf and couldn't hear a word he said But she looks at me and says, suddenly

'That's Sally Gray' Just like that, her eyes like pistols

'That's Sally Gray'

'No, Gran, that's Mrs Prosser Excuse her, Mrs Prosser, the mind . She's failing'

'It's Sally Gray,' says the old lady

'Now, Gran!' says Mrs. Jenkins 'You be a good girl'

'It's the girl that killed our Leshe. It's Sally that sent our boy to Spain and killed him'

'Gran,' says Mrs. Jenkins. 'Stop that I won't have you upset us Excuse her, Mrs Prosser. My husband's brother was killed in the Spanish war She doesn't forget it.'

'It's Sally Gray, the schoolteacher, who went to prison and got her name in the papers and broke poor Mrs. Gray's heart.' The old lady stands flap-

ping her little hands about and turning round and round like a dog

The atmosphere — you can imagine it !

‘Now Gran, Mrs Prosser didn’t do anything to Les It’s a long time ago ’

‘Tuesday, we heard,’ the old lady said

‘Gran,’ says the lad, taking the old lady’s arm to steady her, ‘Don’t carry on It’d be a bad day for the workers if they didn’t fight for themselves. Uncle Les was an idealist ’ Nine miles outside the town in weather like this !

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Prosser,’ says Mrs Jenkins ‘Switch on the telly, Harry She’s a great problem Definitely ’

‘I could kill her,’ says Mrs Jenkins, standing up stiff And she suddenly picks up the teapot and rushes out of the room, crying.

‘Excuse us,’ says Mr Jenkins, giving the old lady a shake What a committee to put me in a house like that with a mad woman. Where’s the consideration ? And they bring me here in a borrowed car that breaks down and we stand there on the moor, with the sleet coming through your stockings And they spell your name wrong and scrape up an audience of ten or twenty people.

There was a cheer from the audience. The voice had got into them. Mrs Prosser paused she was startled herself. And as she paused for the cheer and the voice cracked a thin joke about the Foreign Secretary ‘They fly about from Bonn to

## *The Speech*

Washington, from Washington to London, you don't see them flying down here. They're afraid of getting their feathers dirty,' and got a laugh from them, a dirty, draughty laugh, which gave the man at the end of the row a chance to get his leg out further and get ready to make a bolt for it — at that very second she saw the dead-white face of the clock at the end of the hall, its black hands like a jack-knife, opening

Ten to nine! Her husband down at Plymouth, the other end of the country. And Jack? Where was Jack? But her voice went on with the speech and when it had picked up its freedom again and sailed on, she silently asked the audience: Where's my son? What have you done with my son? A year ago I could tell you what he was doing. He'd come home from school, get himself some supper, that boy could cook, oh yes, and clean up afterwards — and then settle to his homework. He could look after himself, better than a grown man. From the age of nine he could manage on his own. My husband and I could leave him a week at a time and he didn't mind. And I'll tell you something else. a boy with a real political conscience.

You've done it — her body was saying to the audience — *you've* done it! For twenty-five years my husband and I have been fighting for *you*, fighting the class enemy, getting justice for you and you sit there — what is left of you — pulling in the big money, drunk on hire purchase, mesmer-



ized by your tellys and your pools — and what do you do for *us* ? When I knew I was going to have that boy I said to my husband 'We won't let this stop the work' And we didn't But you and your rotten society just did nothing A year ago he was the best boy in this country and you couldn't stand it No You had to get him out and start him drinking with a lot of thieving hooligans, you put a flick-knife in his hand You know what he said to his father 'Well you were in prison, you and Mother, you told me' 'Son,' his father said, 'we were fighting for justice for the people' 'Oh, that crap !' he says That's what the great British people did while we were working for them Those people out there lost a son twenty-five years ago in Spain. I want to tell you I lost mine last year — killed by his own side

'Good old Sally,' the audience shouted 'Hit 'em' Mrs Prosser paused with a smile of victory

'But, my friends, you will say to me,' the voice suddenly became quiet and reasonable, 'this government cannot act alone It has got to consider the American government and the Russian government You will say the British people cannot isolate itself from the human family . '

But Mrs. Prosser was saying to them

Before I came here this evening they took me to this Lord Birt's house, the one I told you about with all those chimneys , very friendly those chimneys looked when we were courting in the wood

## *The Speech*

above. My husband and I used to look down at the house. And the time I liked best was when the smoke was going up straight from them in the autumn. Some week-ends 'when there was company at the house, the smoke went up from many of them like it does from his lordship's mills, but pleasanter, homey. You'd see rooks turning round and round over it and hear a dog drag its chain and bark, or hear pails clash where they were washing the car or swooshing out the yard at the back, I always wanted to see inside when I was a girl. Well, to-day I saw it. Oh yes! There I was inside sitting by the fire with a cat on my knees. Can you see me with a cat? There were some people there, and after we'd had our meal this young man who just made that bad speech was there looking at the books in the white bookcases. And there was a young girl, plump with brown hair, talking to him about them. Lord Birt asked him where they'd been that morning and they said. 'Up the woods and back' I'll tell you something. I was jealous. I was jealous of that young girl talking to that young man. I felt old and ugly and fat. Mind you, I don't like the way these girls wear trousers, so that they look as naked as the tadpoles we used to catch when we were kids. I'd split them myself, you'd have a laugh — but it wasn't that that made me jealous. I couldn't talk about anything. That lad can't make a speech, but he can talk and so could the girl. I sat there dumb and stupid. Every

day, morning and evening, year after year, generation after generation, this was a home and they could talk about a subject in it. If you talked about a subject in my home when I was a girl they'd call you 'stuck up'. All I can do is to make bloody fine speeches in bloody empty halls like this.

There was coughing in the audience and now the voice was quiet. The man sitting at the end of the row with his leg out made up his mind. He got both legs out and, bending slightly, thinking to make himself invisible, he slowly tiptoed out across the bare space to the door at the side. And half those forty or fifty heads, in the midst of their coughing, turned to watch, but not that widely smiling woman who was still looking ravenously up at the platform as if she were going to rush at Mrs. Prosser and swallow her.

Mrs. Prosser saw the man tiptoeing out to that life of his and she did what she always could do, at any meeting, startle it out of its wits with a sudden shout, and make any escaper stop in his absurd delinquent tracks.

'Fellow workers' (the voice rang out), 'don't kid yourselves. You won't escape. It is you and your children who are being betrayed by this cowardly Government. It is you . . .'

But her life, the forty-seven-year-old body with the big white mournful bottom, was saying to them .

And if you want to know what I thought when

## *The Speech*

I passed the long mirror in the hall of Lord Birt's house when we were getting in the car to come to this place, where I was born and brought up and where you can't even spell my name, if you want to know what I thought, I can tell you It's you have made me ugly Working for you ! You never gave me a minute to read a book, look at a picture or feed the spirit inside me It was you who made me sit dumb as an old cow back there You fight for justice and lose half your life You're ugly and you've made me as ugly as you are

The applause went up sharp and short near the platform and echoed in the emptiness behind the audience Chairs shifted Mrs Prosser sat down Lord Birt and the young man congratulated her She looked scornfully and boastfully at them .

'I've wet them,' she said as they walked away down the steps off the platform Out of the little crowd of people who had stayed behind to talk to the speakers, the young girl came forward and secretively, not to embarrass him, squeezed the young man's arm and said 'You were wonderful.' He hardly listened but was looking eagerly into the crowd that surrounded Mrs Prosser.

'We'll wait for her,' he said fiercely 'She had them' — he held out his cupped hand — 'like that '

## *Two Weeks Beyond Shoreditch*

ROBERT RUBENS

AFTER a day of vomiting, I pulled myself together and, looking like an over-dressed cadaver, went to my Harley Street doctor (I had got stuck with this man over a year ago when I needed Tedrol tablets for my asthma) I was too weak and nauseated now to think about getting someone on the National Health, so I made my way into his striped-wallpapered waiting-room not thinking of the four-guinea-a-visit bill that would come at the end of the month with Dr. Franklin Roth's Compliments

He took a quick look at me, made the usual tests, and told me I had it - jaundice Complete rest, in hospital for four weeks at the least 'No, I can't afford the London Clinic, Dr Roth' He made some phone calls and got me a bed in a hospital somewhere beyond Shoreditch. I took a taxi back to my room where I picked up my pyjamas and a few Penguins, then to the hospital. It was a bleak day and the building looked like a Dickensian workhouse, all red brick and rows of high little windows

## *Two Weeks Beyond Shoreditch*

A tall, over-enunciating Indian examined me, digging his fingers into my stomach, feeling for the bloated liver, and asking how old I was when I had the mumps and at what age I had my tonsils out. I was too limp to talk about my childhood and I think I was rather abrupt with him.

They wrapped me up in a sarcophagus of white blankets and an old man wheeled me on a stretcher through an open cloister to a 1940's modernized wing of the hospital. My room, they called it a cubicle, was on the ground floor with a window looking out on to a lawn. I dissolved in the bed like an aspirin in water and woke up hours later with shafts of sun pouring over me and voices echoing from the hallway.

The cubicle was a glass-walled partition that separated me from the rest of the contagious men in the Fever Ward. It was like lying in Selfridges' window with people strolling past and peering casually in at me. I saw some pulled-back curtains on the doors — there were two glass swing-doors — and got out of bed to close them. Suddenly a minuscule negress in a white ice-cream cone cap rushed in.

'You're not supposed to be out of bed,' she said in a calypso voice.

'I just wanted to draw the curtains.'

'Curtains not supposed to be closed in day times. You stay in bed. This is infectious ward where people stay in bed at all time.'

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She tightened my blanket, repeated 'Patients never go out of bed in this ward,' and swung out of the room

My mouth had gone dry and I looked round for some kind of bell or buzzer to call back the nurse, but there was none I saw her swish through the hall and waved to her She looked straight at me but didn't come in I saw her again and waved.. She gave me a quizzical look and walked past the door There was a sink in the corner of the cubicle, so when I was sure there was no one looking, I got out of bed and took some water from the tap

'I told you before that you are not allowed to be out of bed ' She had caught me

'I had to have a drink of water '

. 'That sink is not for patients It is for doctors and nurses to clean hands before leaving patient's cubicle. You are infectious and must not use that sink '

'But I tried to catch your attention You saw me wave, didn't you ?'

'I am on afternoon call now I am busy taking temperatures and pulse '

'Could you get me some water ?'

'Patient's drinking water is given by staff nurse at tea-time It is not my job.' She tightened my blanket, washed her hands at the sink, and swung out

'Well, good afternoon Is everything all right ?'  
A completely bald young man with a beaked nose

### *Two Weeks Beyond Shoreditch*

and hands folded in a gesture of supplication was standing in the doorway. I rolled over to the other side of the bed and mumbled, 'No'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' he said 'What seems to be the trouble?'

'It's that nurse She's sadistic Tell her to stay out of this room'

'But she has to come in here It's her job'

'She comes in and taunts me She wouldn't even bring me a glass of water'

'I'm sorry about that' He looked confused 'I'll speak to her'

He fixed the curtain, glanced out the window, put his hands back in their prayer position and left

'That was the charge nurse,' said a woman who had come in to dust the room 'He's in charge of this ward but we don't call him nurse because he's a man such a nice man Mr O'Fay.' She wore a dull green uniform and cap, and she dusted the entire cubicle in several minutes Before she left she said in a mid-European accent 'It's all right. It's not so bad here after a while'

Evening came with a fat-free meal of potatoes and strips of watery chicken. Then a glass of cold Ovaltine an hour later and the lights went out. The next morning someone shook my arm at six o'clock and put a cup of tea on the bed table An hour later a nurse I hadn't seen before came in and pulled down my bed clothes She spread a hairy blanket over the mattress and began giving



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me what she called a 'blanket bath'. This consisted of pouring some luke-warm water over my chest and rubbing my arms, legs and neck with a soapy cloth until I was raw and freezing. She then slipped the soaked blanket from under me and miraculously the bed had remained dry. But I was so damp that in a few seconds the whole bed was dank cold, and I began to sneeze.

Later in the morning while I was convincing myself that it was all Dr Roth's fault, Mr O'Fay came in with an Indian doctor called Laipul and a director of the hospital, Dr Dillman.

They stood at the foot of my bed while Mr O'Fay closed all the curtains, pulled down the blanket and rolled up my pyjama top.

'Good morning, and how are you to-day?' said Dr Dillman. He was plump, about seventy, with a waxy moustache.

'I feel awful,' I said.

'Yes, we are a bit yellow, aren't we?' But not severely so.' He put his thumb under my eye, then examined my chest. 'Slight eczema,' he murmured. He felt my stomach, wrote something in his note-book and whispered to Laipul.

'Mr O'Fay has told me that you've complained about one of our nurses. Is that true?' Dillman was standing at the foot of the bed.

'Yes, I did complain about her. She was rude and unhelpful.'

'Nobody has ever complained before about the

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behaviour of our nurses This one in particular has a flawless record ' He was twitching his septa-coloured moustache 'I think you imagined that she was rude to you People who are ill very often do imagine such things '

'That's the point,' I said My head was throbbing 'I am ill and she hasn't been in the least helpful She was insolent '

'But you must realize that when people have jaundice they tend to be more irritable than usual '

'I'm sure they do, but that's all the more reason for a nurse to be helpful when a patient is——'

'But I have no reason to believe that this particular nurse isn't entirely competent '

'How do you know? Has she ever taken care of you when you were ill? I'm telling you she's nasty and downright mean '

'Now I realize that she is coloured and that some people have a rather intolerant attitude towards——'

'I don't care what colour she is!' I said 'I don't care if she's purple or blue. The fact is she was rude and I don't want her coming in this room.'

'We cannot change our schedule to suit the moods of an irritable patient.' He was looking straight at me. 'I want you to apologize to her for having lost your temper.'

'I will not apologize to her and I did not lose my temper.'

*Robert Rubens*

'She deserves an apology from you    You've upset her '

'I've upset *her* ?    What are you trying to do ?  
Do you always fight with your patients ?'

'I think you are a disagreeable young man '

'Oh, you think so ?'

'And I don't want your sort of person in this ward '

'And I don't want you in my room, my cubicle, as long as it is my cubicle.    So get out , all of you '  
Mr O'Fay was nervously wringing his hands as he led the two doctors into the hall

I didn't know what would happen next and I was more than a little scared    Not that I wanted to stay there, but I knew that it was probably as good as any other hospital, and I didn't relish the prospect of changing at that point.    The next day Dr Roth came in wearing the regulation white robe over his pin-striped suit.

'This isn't a bad place at all,' he said    'You probably couldn't get better care in a private clinic. But the thing is you've offended Dillman    He rang me up yesterday and said they want to discharge you.    I'm not sure I could find you a place somewhere else at such short notice.'

'But he came in here and started an argument    He wanted me to apologize to a nurse for complaining about her.    Then he tried to imply that I was prejudiced because she's a negress '

'Now, look, he's an old man about to retire and

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you've offended him. If you want to stay here you'd better apologize to him. Otherwise he could make things very unpleasant for you.'

Roth was a master at smoothing out situations. He had obviously appeased Dr. Dillman's bruised ego and paved the way for me to make a brief apology. So I swallowed my pride and asked to speak to him the following day. He was vague and acted as though he had almost forgotten the incident, accepting my garbled apology and offering me his best wishes for a speedy recovery.

Once the storm had cleared and it was settled that I was to stay there, I began reading, writing some letters and even making conversation with the nurses. At about 10.30 every morning Bertha came in, dust-cloth in hand, hair entangled under her nurse's cap. With wild eyes she dusted the room and looked, in spite of her forty-odd years, like an ecstatic young marcher in a German youth movement.

'It is so wonderful, the sun. It brings light into my heart. And such beautiful flowers,' she said, as she watered a plant that had been sent to me.

'Yes, it's a nice day,' I replied, not looking up from my book.

'Eight months. Eight more long English months.'

'What happens in eight months?' I put the book down.

'Then we will be free.' She turned towards me,

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waving the dust-cloth, her eyes following a crack in the ceiling 'Free to see the mysteries of the Orient '

'You're going to the Orient ?'\*

'Yes But I must wait first for my property Every day I write to my mother in Salzburg to ask when But now I know it will be in eight months '

'Why in eight months ?'

'Because she is selling it for me Property from before the war which is mine I don't want to keep it in Salzburg , it is not my home any more '

'How long have you been away ?'

'Seven years And when I go back it is like visiting a foreign country It is not the same Austria as when I was a child I hate to go back ' She was rubbing over and over the same patch of window-sill

'For three years I worked in Wales as a house-keeper, but studying all the time , always to improve my mind Even now I go to night class for physiotherapy '

'You plan to be a physiotherapist ?'

'No, I just want to know about it, to understand. When I get my property I will stop working here and study all the time , English history and anthropology. My fiancé thinks I am silly, that I study too much, but he doesn't know what it is to want to learn.'

Still looking at the crack in the ceiling, she slipped out of the room.

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'You're not so yellow as you were,' said Mr O'Fay in his high-pitched Irish voice 'Laipul said you've got a mild case and you might only have to stay a fortnight'

'Well, I'm glad to hear that,' I said.

'I'm exhausted to-day,' said O'Fay 'Only had four hours' sleep last night because I moved into a new flat and we stayed up till half-past four putting things in place'

'Where's the flat?'

'Stepney It's furnished, but we had to go out and buy dishes because neither of us had any before'

'You're sharing it?'

'Yes, I'd never live alone It'd drive me crazy. I lived here in the hospital for two years, but it wasn't like living alone really. There was always someone about to play table tennis with in the rec-room.'

He looked through the glass, and, seeing Dr Laipul coming down the hall, he assured me he would call in later and left I slowly settled myself down to reading and then heard screams from the next cubicle I saw through the glass wall a little boy jumping up and down on his bed and being scolded by the orderly.

After forcefully tucking him under the covers, the orderly, who was called George (he was Spanish and his name was Jorge), came into my cubicle.

'That Tommy is a crazy boy,' he said. 'He is here too long and he goes off his head. Eight weeks

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in that cubicle like an animal in a cage But tough'  
He is a tough little animal. Scream, scream  
twist, twist '

'Why has he been here so long ? What's the  
matter with him ?'

'He is for observation He had dysentery '

George was short and tubby with beady eyes  
and a mass of high-styled Italianized hair

'Bad place for children,' he said 'For anyone  
How long you stay here ?'

'I hope to be out in a fortnight '

'Fortnight ? No, it takes a long time for Hepa-  
titis Relax, get used to this place or you will be  
screaming like Tommy there ' He gave a porno-  
graphic snicker 'You know what it comes from ?  
Jaundice ? . Too much drink ? You drink a  
lot ?'

'No, not very much,' I said 'I thought it's  
some germ you pick up '

'Yes, yes, but where you pick it up ?' He  
giggled and bounced out of the cubicle

After Tommy's screaming and George's insinua-  
tions, my mood for reading had gone I tossed  
about in the bed, looked at the pictures in *Life*  
magazine and wrote a nonsensical letter to some-  
one I hadn't seen for years. The highlight of the  
day was lunch , a mound of unmashed potatoes  
and some fish.

The afternoons were interminable with Tommy  
twisting in front of me, occasional visitors (they

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were allowed half-hour visits and had to wear white protective robes , a regulation still followed from Victorian times when doctors also wore masks when treating fever victims), and Mrs Dale's Diary reminding me I still had eight hours before the day was over.

I began waiting anxiously for Bertha's visits. She would tramp into the cubicle in a state of Viennese ecstasy, praising the beauty of England, the joys of knowledge and the wonders of travel. She would water the plant, gaze at it and reminisce about the gardens of Austria. As she pretended to be dusting the room she would tell me of her hiking trips through the Dolomites, her university days in Heidelberg when she had hoped to be a doctor. She never once looked at me straight in the eyes, but shifted her glance from the curtains to the bedpost to her finger-nails.

'Four times my fiancé was in the hospital, and now he can only lie in bed '

'What did he do before he was ill ?'

'A technician , an x-ray technician in Princess Beatrice Hospital. But for a long time he has not been well enough to work '

'When do you think you'll get married ?' I asked.

'Soon. We will set a date soon. When he is well again. I tell him we will take some of my money from the property and make a wonderful honeymoon, but he says no. Such a gentleman, a



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real English gentleman. He won't use my money. But when we are married I will convince him and we will go to Japan.'

She had brought in a map of the Orient, and we started planning her route from Hong Kong down to Korea. Every day we went over it together, checking on the population of the towns, the places of interest and the prices of hotels and restaurants. She had also brought me two books on present-day Tokyo from the hospital library, and I read them carefully. I drew up a list of ancient temples that she should visit, and outlined them on the map of Japan. Bertha studied the list and one day came in and recited all the names of the temples.

'He will love it,' she said. 'It will be wonderful for him, like visiting another world. To see another civilization is important to understand your own. This is what I tell him, but he laughs at me. He won't laugh when we are there in the great temples of Buddha. It will make him a new person.'

She held up a book on Thailand and said, 'I will read this to-night, and to-morrow you will help me make an i-tin-er-ary, that is the word, yes?'

It was one of those late afternoons when the whole ward had sunk into a communal nap. I could see rows of iron bedsteads and not a head propped on a pillow. I was lying there trying to figure out why I enjoyed Bertha's more than my friends' visits, when I saw Mr. O'Fay tiptoeing towards the door.

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'I found this in the office' He handed me a back issue of the *Architectoral Quarterly* 'Bertha told me you're an architect so I thought you might want to read this You know, she loves talking to you'

'Well, I like talking to her'

'She's a very kind woman'

'Yes, she is,' I said

'I feel sorry for her,' said O'Fay

'Why?'

'She's had an awful life. Austria during the war, most of her family killed——'

'But she loves living in England and she'll be getting married soon.'

'I'm not so sure about that I don't think he'll marry her He likes her all right, but he's not the marrying type He knows he's got a good thing as it is'

'What do you mean?'

'She's been supporting him for the last three years. She's taken him all over Europe twice Once she took him to visit her family in Austria and he stayed there for six months, living off her mother. Bertha had to come back to London to her job here and she sent him half her salary every week. Finally she sent him a ticket to come back.'

'But he's ill, isn't he?' I said 'She says there's something wrong with his gall-bladder.'

'Oh, yes, he's sick, but not all that sick. He

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could be working part-time if he wanted to I was over there visiting them the other night and he looked all right to me He was sitting there watching the telly in his dressing-gown and complaining about Bertha's cooking 'Actually she's a good cook '

'What does he do with himself, then?'

'Just sits there watching the telly and reading detective stories while she's working here all day They've been living in that room for three years '

'She thinks he's going to marry her soon '

'She's been thinking that for three years If she didn't think that she'd be lost.' He turned towards the office 'Laipul's here now I've got to go Hope you enjoy the magazine '

I suppose I had sensed that Bertha's talk of getting married and the trip to the Orient and probably the property in Salzburg was mostly fantasy, but I had wanted to go along with the whole thing Mr O'Fay's information hit me in a way I hadn't expected, undercutting a good fifty per cent of my day-to-day life in the hospital All our talks of the wedding in the old chapel outside Chichester, their week-end in Eastbourne before the sailing from Southampton and the trip through the Orient . it all went hollow for me and I wasn't at all sure I could keep up the game with her I couldn't sleep that night and had to ask the night nurse for a pill.

The next morning Bertha swirled in, smiling and radiant.

## *Two Weeks Beyond Shoreditch*

'Now I have a new Easter outfit and it is beautiful,' she announced 'Yesterday I went to Mile End and bought it I had seen it once from the corner of my eye in a shop there weeks ago So I went back and there it was , lavender with little white flowers all over And my fiancé, when I tried it on for him, he said I look like a young girl '

'Did you buy a hat ?'

'No, I take my old straw and put new flowers on it Easy as that My fiancé smiled and smiled when he saw me in the dress He is not a man who gives compliments much. But yesterday I could see that he was pleased He didn't even have to say it' She watered the plant on the window-sill, gently touching the petals 'A good day for me, yesterday Everything was good , ..a new dress, my fiancé was happy, then after dinner I went to watch television with George and Mr O'Fay Such a nice flat they have.'

'You mean Mr. O'Fay who works here ?'

'Yes, he and George, you know the Spanish boy, the orderly, they just moved into a flat together. Nice and new They are so happy there '

She looked down the hall, explained that she had not yet finished the Thailand book and promised to bring me some extra biscuits later in the afternoon. As she was leaving, George rushed in. He winked at her in the doorway and began fixing my bed.

'Still yellow,' he said. 'You look like a daffodil.'

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'Thank you You say just what I want to hear'

'But's true You get more yellow every day I look at you'

'Dr Laipul says I'm improving'

'Laipul is nutty in the head Besides, he has bad eyes and cannot see I am telling you, you are yellow'

'George, could you do something for me?'

'I can do somethings, not everything' He did a suggestion of a Twist and adjusted the curls that dipped over his forehead 'What is it, yellow boy?'

'Cigarettes'

'Cigarettes? I thought you want me to bring you something really good But no, you are too yellow for that' He laughed and began cleaning the sink 'For cigarettes you must ask permission of Mr. O'Fay You think I want to lose my job?'

'You won't lose your job Here, I'll give you the money'

'No, no, you must first ask Mr O'Fay He is strict about that'

I had to wait an hour without cigarettes until O'Fay came in He was clasping his hands as usual as he opened the swing door

'Of course he can get them for you,' he said when I asked him about the cigarettes. 'He'll get them in his lunch hour. How are you feeling to-day?'

'Fine How are you?'

'Not so good. I'm on deximil Had a row last

## *Two Weeks Beyond Shoreditch*

night with the chap I live with. He's been driving me round the bend. Gets up at three in the morning and goes in the kitchen to make spaghetti. Says he can't sleep. I've got to have my rest because I have to be here at eight every morning. Besides that he hasn't paid any of the rent yet. And that spaghetti he's always making. It's mine. I bought all the food.'

'What did you do?'

'Threw him out. Told him to go. I'd paid the rent and the lease is in my name. I couldn't take it any more. But now I'm stuck with six pounds a week to pay on my own, and it drives me crazy being there by myself.'

George walked in and they glared at each other. Mr. O'Fay took the water jug and left.

'What did he say?' George asked.

'He said you can get me the cigarettes.'

'You see? I knew he would say yes, but's better that you asked him first. He is a nice man, but a little strange in the head, don't you think?'

There were times during the day when Mr. O'Fay and George had to work side by side. When they were getting the meals ready or checking the temperature charts. O'Fay, who was well over six feet tall and willowy, had a tendency to sway like someone in the last stages of a revivalist meeting. The two of them reminded me of an ascetic young missionary and his native assistant working silently together in a malaria hospital.

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But O'Fay looked paler than usual as he flitted from one cubicle to another. He repeated the story to me of the incident with his flat-mate and asked if I knew anyone who might want to share with him.

'It's making me mental. I can't live alone. I just took a tranquillizer because the deximil was making me too jumpy. I hate to go back to taking them all the time, but it's the only thing I can do. Just can't live alone.'

Bertha, wearing a blue cape and clutching her laundry, slipped me a packet of biscuits and the Thailand book.

'To-morrow we make the route through Siam. That was what they called it in *The King and I*. So beautiful Deborah Kerr, like a red-haired angel.' Her cheeks were flushed and I could see that she would be hearing the bells of Bangkok all afternoon at the Launderette.

'Bertha, have you talked to Mr O'Fay to-day? He seems upset.'

'Yes, I know. It is because of that devil George. He stays up too late, but he will calm down. I must go now so I can finish my work in time for physiotherapy class.'

George came in and threw the cigarettes on my bed. 'I've had enough of England,' he announced. 'I think I will go to Germany and learn German. When I can speak English, French and German then I can work in my father's restaurant.'

## *Two Weeks Beyond Shoreditch*

• ‘Is that what you plan to do?’

‘What else should I do?’ That is why I came here To learn English to speak to the tourists for my father’

‘Why have you had enough of England?’

‘Stiff, it is all stiff like the collars When I first came I thought London was crazy like a carnival But it’s not, it’s sad like a funeral The other boys I know from Spain who are here, they run every night to the coffee bars They like that they think London is wonderful They all live, eight of them, in one little flat Run, run, in and out of the coffee bars I don’t like to live like that’

‘You don’t live with them?’

‘No, I live with a friend We live quiet Why should I run like my Spanish friends?’

‘Then why do you want to leave England’

‘Because it is time I speak English now, so I leave It is also time I leave here for to-day My friend and I go to see Helen Shapiro to-night A new film she’s in Good-night, yellow boy’

He buzzed down the hall and passed Mr O’Fay They didn’t look at each other

The next morning when Bertha came in with my cornflakes and milk, she announced. ‘It is all finished. They gave up the flat Such a beautiful new flat and a television.’

‘You mean George and Mr. O’Fay?’

‘Yes, he made George move out and now he is



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selling the dishes That crazy George, all his money he spends on clothes and gramophone records Now he has no gramophone because it was Mr O'Fay's machine They are not friends any more They don't even look at each other Horrible, and I am in the middle '

'But I thought he was going to share the flat with someone else '

'He thought maybe, but now he is giving it up and moving back to the hospital. It's no good for him to work here and live here too '

I saw George rushing in and out of the cubicles He winked at me and popped his head in the door

'Hello, yellow boy '

'George, come here a minute '

• 'What is it ? I am busy, busy, busy '

'I just want to know what you decided to do '

'I think I stay in England I don't know why, I just think so To-morrow maybe I change my mind '

Mr O'Fay came in while I was eating lunch 'Well, I told the landlord I'm moving I'm getting my same room back again in the hospital '

'By the way,' I said, trying to seem casual 'What's happened to the boy you were sharing with ?'

'Oh, he moved back to where he lived before, to a flat with a bunch of wild Spaniards They're all gigolos. That's where he belongs '

Bertha suddenly rushed in and handed me an

*Two Weeks Beyond Shoreditch*

official-looking envelope from the Kensington Town Hall 'It's happened! He did it! Look at that letter!'

'It's from the Bureau of licences,' I said, confused

'Yes, it's for me to sign to have a marriage licence'

'It's wonderful,' she continued 'I knew that it would happen soon. He applied for the licence without even telling me. Such a marvellous surprise'

'Congratulations. Then you'll be getting married soon'

'Yes, ten days it takes. This is the happiest day for me. In two weeks I will be Mrs Johnson'

I watched her run up the hall waving the letter. She showed it first to Mr O'Fay then to George. I was glad that Mr O'Fay had turned out to be wrong about Bertha's fiancé. Whether or not she would actually take that trip to the Orient I couldn't be sure, and the question of her property in Salzburg still seemed to be shrouded in fantasy. But I was glad that the news of the marriage came that day, because I was scheduled to be leaving the hospital the following afternoon.

An hour later Bertha came in still holding the letter.

'Not for me,' she said 'You see, it says on the envelope: Bertha Bainer. They made a mistake and gave it to me. My name is Bertha Rainer. But it's all right. I know the other Bertha. She

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is also an Austrian who used to work here Now she is at St George's I will take this to her to-morrow '

'I'm sorry to hear that. An awful mistake '

'It's my fault,' she said with a brave little smile 'I should have looked more carefully at the envelope Anyway, we are not ready to get married yet It's better for us that we wait for my property to be sold ' She was still smiling and looking up at the crack in the ceiling

'It will be wonderful,' she said, 'to have some money and make a real honeymoon How many temples are there in Thailand? Where is the map?'

I opened up the map on which I had outlined a scenic and historic route. Bertha studied it for a moment then turned to the yellow plant on the window sill 'Oh, I forgot to water the flowers yesterday ' She took the jug from the table 'I will give them fresh drinking water '

I watched her slowly pour the water into the flower-pot She paused between each splash as though afraid to choke the roots

'Bertha,' I said. 'Do you want that plant?'

'Do I want it? But it is yours '

'I don't want to take it home with me to-morrow You take it when I leave '

'You would give me this beautiful plant? It will bring light into my room And my fiancé, he loves flowers so much '

### *Two Weeks Beyond Shoreditch*

The next day I was discharged from the hospital, but warned to stay off my feet for about a week. My room was musty and disorganized, exactly as I had left it two weeks before. I knew that I should stay in that night, have a quiet meal and go to bed early, but a friend phoned and I couldn't resist going out to dinner. So, feeling wobbly but delightfully free, I took a bus at the corner. I climbed to the top and sat down and lit a cigarette. As the bus moved towards the bottom of Heathdene Road, I recognized a familiar figure walking on the other side of the street. It was Bertha clumping along in her blue cape. I only had a quick glance at her as the bus turned into the High Street, but I could see that she was still wearing her green uniform. She had taken off her cap and her hair was blowing in the wind. She looked very young and determined. She marched up Heathdene Road with her left arm extended carrying my yellow plant like a shield in the wind.

# *The Gentile Jewesses*

MURIEL SPARK

ONE day a madman came into my little grandmother's shop at Watford. I say my little grandmother but 'little' refers only to her height and to the dimensions of her world by the square foot — the small shop full of varieties, her parlour behind it, and behind that the stone kitchen and the two bedrooms over her head.

'I shall murder you,' said the madman, standing with legs straddled in the door frame, holding up his dark big hands as one about to pounce and strangle. His eyes stared from a face covered with tangled eyebrows and beard.

The street was empty. My grandmother was alone in the house. For some years, from frequent hearing of the story, I believed I was standing by her side at the time, but my grandmother said no, this was long before I was born. The scene is as clear as a memory to me. The madman — truly escaped from the asylum in a great park near-by — lifted his hairy hands, cupped as for strangling. Behind him was the street, empty save for sunshine.

He said, 'I'm going to murder you.'

She folded her hands over her white apron which

### *The Gentile Jewesses*

lay over the black apron and looked straight at him.

'Then you'll get hung,' she said

He turned and shuffled away

She should have said 'hanged' and I remember at one telling of the story remarking so to my grandmother. She replied that 'hung' had been good enough for the madman. I could not impress her with words, but I was so impressed by the tale that very often afterwards I said 'hung' instead of 'hanged'

I seem to see the happening so plainly in my memory it is difficult to believe I know it only by hearsay, but indeed it happened before I was born. My grandfather was a young man then, fifteen years younger than his wife and dispossessed by his family for having married her. He was gone to arrange about seedlings when the madman had appeared.

My grandmother had married him for pure love, she had chased him and hunted him down and married him, he was so beautiful and useless. She never cared at all that she had to work and keep him all his life. She was astonishingly ugly, one was compelled to look at her. In my actual memory, late in their marriage, he would bring her a rose from the garden from time to time, and put cushions under her head and feet when she reclined on the sofa in the parlour between the hours of two and three in the afternoon. He could not scrub the counter in her shop for he did not know how to

## *Muriel Spark*

do it, but he knew about dogs and birds and gardens; and had photography for a pastime

He said to my grandmother, 'Stand by the dahlias and I will take your likeness'

I wished she had known how to take his likeness because he was golden-haired even in my day, with delicate features and glittering whiskers. She had a broad pug nose, she was sallow skinned with bright, black eyes staring straight at the world and her dull black hair pulled back tight into a knot. She looked like a white negress, she did not try to beautify herself except by washing her face in rain water.

She had come from Stepney. Her mother was a Gentile and her father was a Jew. She said her father was a Quack by profession and she was proud of this, because she felt all curing was done by the kindly manner of the practitioner in handing out bottles of medicine rather than by the contents. I always forced my elders to enact their stories. I said, 'Show me how he did it'

Willingly she leaned forward in her chair and handed me an invisible bottle of medicine. She said, 'There you are, my dear, and you won't come to grief, and don't forget to keep your bowels regular.' She said, 'My father's medicine was only beetroot juice but he took pains with his manners, and he took pains with the labels, and the bottles were threepence a gross. My father cured many an ache and pain, it was his gracious manner.'

This, too, entered my memory and I believed I

## *The Gentile Jewesses*

had seen the glamorous Quack Doctor who was dead before I was born. I thought of him when I saw my grandfather, with his gracious manner, administering a tiny dose of medicine out of a blue bottle to one of his small coloured birds. He opened its beak with his finger and tipped in a drop. All the little garden was full of kennels, glass and sheds containing birds and flower-pots. His photographs were not quite real to look at. One day he called me Canary and made me stand by the brick wall for my likeness. The photograph made the garden look tremendous. Perhaps he was reproducing in his photographs the grander garden of his youth from which he was expelled avengingly upon his marriage to my grandmother long before I was born.

After his death, when my grandmother came to live with us I said to her one day,

‘Are you a Gentile, Grandmother, or are you a Jewess?’ I was wondering how she would be buried, according to what religion, when her time came to die.

‘I am a Gentile Jewess,’ she said.

All during the time she kept the shop of all sorts in Watford she had not liked the Jewish part of her origins to be known, because it was bad for business. She would have been amazed at any suggestion that this attitude was a weak one or a wrong one. To her, whatever course was sensible and good for business was good in the sight of the Almighty. She believed heartily in the Almighty. I never



## *Muriel Spark*

heard her refer to God by any other title except to say, God bless you. She was a member of the Mothers' Union of the Church of England. She attended all the social functions of the Methodists, Baptists and Quakers. This was bright and agreeable as well as being good for business. She never went to church on Sundays, only for special services such as on Remembrance Day. The only time she acted against her conscience was when she attended a spiritualist meeting, this was from sheer curiosity, not business. There, a bench fell over on to her foot and she limped for a month, it was a judgment of the Almighty.

I inquired closely about spiritualism. 'They call up the dead from their repose,' she said. 'It vexes the Almighty when the dead are stirred before they are ready.'

Then she told me what happened to spiritualists after a number of years had passed over their heads. 'They run up the garden path, look back over their shoulders, give a shudder, and run back again. I dare say they see spirits.'

I took my grandmother's hand and led her out to the garden to make her show me what spiritualists did. She ran up the path splendidly with her skirts held up in her hands, looked round with sudden bright eyes, shuddered horribly, then, with skirts held higher so that her white petticoat frills flickered round her black stockings, she ran gasping back towards me.

## *The Gentile Jewesses*

My grandfather came out to see the fun with his sandy eyebrows raised high among the freckles 'Stop your larks, Adelaide,' he said to my grandmother

So my grandmother did it again, with a curdling cry, 'Ah-ah-ah'

Rummaging in the shop, having climbed up on two empty fizz-pop crates, I found on an upper shelf some old bundles of candles wrapped in interesting-looking literature. I smoothed out the papers and read, 'Votes for Women' Why do you Oppress Women?' Another lot of candles was wrapped in a larger bill on which was printed an old-fashioned but military-looking young woman waving the Union Jack and saying, 'I'm off to join the Suffragettes' I asked my grandmother where the papers came from, for she never threw anything away and must have had them for another purpose before wrapping up the candles before I was born My grandfather answered for her, so far forgetting his refinement as to say, 'Mrs Spank-arse's lark'.

'Mrs. Pankhurst, he means I'm surprised at you, Tom, in front of the child'

My grandfather was smiling away at his own joke. And so all in one afternoon I learned a new word, and the story of my grandmother's participation in the Women's Marches down Watford High Street, dressed in her best clothes, and I learned also my grandfather's opinions about these happenings. I saw, before my very eyes, my grandmother

*Muriel Spark*

and her banner, marching in the sunshiny street with her friends, her white petticoat twinkling at her ankles as she walked. In a few years' time it was difficult for me to believe I had not stood and witnessed the march of the Watford Suffragettes moving up the High Street, with my grandmother swiftly in the van before I was born. I recalled how her shiny black straw hat gleamed in the sun.

Some Jews came to Watford and opened a bicycle shop not far from my grandmother's. She would have nothing to do with them. They were Polish immigrants. She called them Pollacks. When I asked what this meant she said, 'foreigners'. One day the mama-foreigner came to the door of her shop as I was passing and held out a bunch of grapes. She said, 'Eat'. I ran, amazed, to my grandmother who said, 'I told you that foreigners are funny.'

Amongst ourselves she boasted of her Jewish blood because it had made her so clever. I knew she was so clever that it was unnecessary for her to be beautiful. She boasted that her ancestors on her father's side crossed over the Red Sea, the Almighty stretched forth his hands and parted the waves, and they crossed over from Egypt on to dry land. Miriam, the sister of Moses, banged her timbrel and led all the women across the Red Sea, singing a song to the Almighty. I thought of the Salvation Army girls who quite recently had marched up Watford High Street in the sunshine

## *The Gentile Jewesses*

banging their tambourines My grandmother had called me to the shop door to watch, and when they and their noise were dwindled away she turned from the door and clapped her hands above her head, half in the spontaneous spirit of the thing, half in mimicry She clapped her hands 'Alleluia !' cried my grandmother. 'Alleluia !'

'Stop your larks, Adelaide, my dear '

Was I present at the Red Sea crossing ? No, it had happened before I was born My head was full of stories, of Greeks and Trojans, Picts and Romans, Jacobites and Redcoats, but these were definitely outside of my lifetime It was different where my grandmother was concerned I see her in the vanguard, leading the women in their dance of triumph, clanging the tambourine for joy and crying Alleluia with Mrs. Pankhurst and Miriam the sister of Moses The hands of the Almighty hold back the walls of the sea My grandmother's white lace-edged petticoat flashes beneath her black skirt an inch above her boots, as it did when she demonstrated up and down the garden path what happens to spiritualists What part of the scene I saw and what happened before I was born can be distinguished by my reason, but my reason cannot obliterate the scene or diminish it

Great-aunts Sally and Nancy, my grandfather's sisters, had been frigidly reconciled to him at some date before I was born. I was sent to visit them every summer. They lived quietly now, a widow

## *Muriel Spark*

and a spinster of small means. They occupied themselves with altar-flowers and the vicar. I was a Gentile Jewess like my grandmother, for my father was a Jew, and these great-aunts could not make it out that I did not look like a Jew as did my grandmother. They remarked on this in my presence as if I could not understand that they were discussing my looks. I said that I did look like a Jew and desperately pointed to my small feet. 'All Jews have very little feet,' I claimed. They took this for fact, being inexperienced in Jews, and admitted to each other that I possessed this Jewish characteristic.

Nancy's face was long and thin and Sally's was round. There seemed to be a lot of pincushions on tiny tables. They gave me aniseed cake and tea every summer while the clock ticked loudly in time to their silence. I looked at the yellowish-green plush upholstery which caught streaks of the sunny afternoon outside, I looked until I had absorbed its colour and texture in a total trance during the great-aunts' silences. Once when I got back to my grandmother's and looked in the glass it seemed my eyes had changed from blue to yellow-green plush.

On one of these afternoons they mentioned my father's being an engineer. I said all Jews were engineers. They were fascinated by this fact which at the time I thought was possibly true with the exception of an occasional Quack. Then Sally looked up and said, 'But the Lingens are not engineers.'

## *The Gentile Jewesses*

The Lingens were not Jews either, they were Gentiles of German origin, but it came to the same thing in those parts. The Lingens were not classified as foreigners by my grandmother because they did not speak in broken English, being all of a London-born generation.

The Lingen girls were the main friends of my mother's youth. There was Lottie who sang well and Flora who played the piano and Susanna who was strange. I remember a long evening in their house when Lottie and my mother sang a duet to Flora's piano playing, while Susanna loitered darkly at the door of the drawing-room with a smile I had never seen on any face before. I could not keep my eyes off Susanna, and got into trouble for staring.

When my mother and Lottie were seventeen they hired a cab one day and went to an inn, some miles away in the country, where they drank gin. They supplied the driver with gin as well, and, forgetting that the jaunt was supposed to be a secret one, returned two hours later standing up in the cab, chanting 'Horrid little Watford. Dirty little Watford. We'll soon say good-bye to nasty little Watford.' They did not consider themselves to be village girls and were eager to be sent away to relatives elsewhere. This was soon accomplished; Lottie went to London for a space and my mother to Edinburgh. My mother told me the story of the wild return of carriage and horses up the High

## *Muriel Spark*

Street and my grandmother confirmed it, adding that the occurrence was bad for business. I can hear the clopping of hooves, and see the girls standing wobbly in the cab dressed in their spotted muslins, although I never actually<sup>9</sup> saw anything but milk-carts, motor cars and buses, and girls with short skirts in the High Street, apart from such links with antiquity as fat old Benskin of Benskins' Breweries taking his morning stroll along the bright pavement, bowing as he passed to my grandmother.

'I am a Gentile Jewess'

She was buried as a Jewess since she died in my father's house, and notices were put in the Jewish press. Simultaneously my great-aunts announced in the Watford papers that she fell asleep in Jesus.

My mother never fails to bow three times to the new moon wherever she might be at the time of first catching sight of it. I have seen her standing on a busy pavement with numerous cold rational Presbyterian eyes upon her, turning over her money, bowing regardless and chanting, 'New moon, new moon, be good to me'. In my memory this image is fused with her lighting of the Sabbath candles on a Friday night, chanting a Hebrew prayer which I have since been told came out in a very strange sort of Hebrew. Still, it was her tribute and solemn observance. She said that the Israelites of the Bible and herself were one and the same because of the Jewish part of her blood, and I did not doubt this

### *The Gentle Jewesses*

thrilling fact I thought of her as the second Gentle Jewess after my grandmother, and myself as the third

My mother carries everywhere in her handbag a small locket containing a picture of Christ crowned with thorns She keeps on one table a rather fine Buddha on a lotus leaf and on another a horrible replica of the Venus de Milo One way and another all the gods are served in my mother's household although she holds only one belief and that is in the Almighty My father, when questioned as to what he believes, will say, 'I believe in the Blessed Almighty who made heaven and earth,' and will say no more, returning to his racing papers which contain problems proper to innocent men To them, it was no great shock when I turned Catholic, since with Roman Catholics too, it all boils down to the Almighty in the end



# *The Valentine Generation*

JOHN WAIN

QUARTER to eight on a Monday morning, well into April but still pretty fresh, and I'm off to a fair start with the collecting. I may be getting on towards retiring age, but I can still get round the boxes as quick as any of them and quicker than most. The secret is to get a move on in the early stages. Get round as many as you can by nine o'clock. After that, the traffic sets in heavy and slows you down so much that you can pretty well reckon to take double time over everything.

This morning I've got one of the light vans and it looks as if I'm getting away easy. I'm round the South-West Fifteen area, the other side of the river. Nice quiet suburban streets, with trees in fresh bloom. Like a trip to the country. So, of course, I let myself be lulled into feeling optimistic. Forty years with the Post Office and I *still* haven't got it into my head that trouble always hits you when you've got your guard down.

I'm coming up to the third box and even as I drive up to it I can see this girl standing there on the pavement. She's only a couple of yards away from the pillar-box, but my early-warning system

## *The Valentine Generation*

still doesn't go off I think perhaps she's waiting for somebody to come out of one of the houses, some girl-friend she travels to work with or her little brother that she's seeing to school Funny joke

I get out of the van and go over to the box with my bunch of keys and my bag at the ready And straight away I see that she's watching me I try to take no notice, but her eyes are boring two holes in the back of my neck

I open the box and there are the letters Not many, because most people who post on a Sunday manage to catch the five o'clock collection About a couple of dozen in all I'm just sweeping them into the bag when the girl takes a step towards me I see her out of the corner of my eye and I straighten up. For a moment I wonder if I'm going to be coshed or something There's a kind of desperation about her But she's alone, a nice-looking girl, about twenty, good class, well dressed. She's very unhappy, I can see that All stirred up about something But it's no business of mine On the collecting you've no time to spare before nine o'clock. After that, you might just as well slacken off, that's what I always tell them.

I turn to go back to the van, but she's speaking to me. I don't quite catch what she's saying She's too confused, the sounds just tumble out over one another.

'Anything wrong, miss?' I say to her, but as I

*John Wain*

speak I'm opening the van door She's not going to hold me up, whatever she wants.

'Yes,' she says 'There's something terribly wrong But you could put it right for me in a minute, if you'd be very kind ' ✓

I don't like the sound of that, but she's waiting for me to say something, so I decide to give her one minute of my time Just one minute She's in trouble, and I've got daughters of my own

'What is it I can do for you?' I say 'It'd better be something I can do within sixty seconds, because on this job, it's all a question of how much you can do before mine—'

She doesn't let me finish She's all over me, reaching out as if she wants to grab hold of my arm 'You can, you can easily do it straight away,' she says 'It's just that — I've posted a letter that I ought never to have posted And I want to get it back If it goes it'll do terrible harm that I could never do anything about You will give it me, won't you ? Please ?'

It's a funny thing, but as I stand there listening to her I have a kind of 'This-is-where-I-came-in' feeling All those years ago, when I first joined the Post Office, I used to wonder if anybody would ever come up to me when I was on collecting and ask me if they could have a letter back And now at last it's happened Of course I've always known I couldn't do it

'Sorry, miss,' I say, shaking my head. 'Firmest

## *The Valentine Generation*

rule in the book Once a thing's posted, it's in the care of the Post Office until it reaches the party it's addressed to '

She draws a deep breath and I can see she's getting ready to work hard 'Look,' she begins But I'm too quick for her 'No, you look,' I say to her 'Forty years I've worked for the Post Office, and all through those forty years it's been my living A job to do, a wage, pension at the end of it, social club, met most of my friends through it one way and another It's like being married Forty years and you don't even want a change You find you can't even imagine it any more '

'Being married ' she says, gulping, as if I'd said something that really hurt her 'I wouldn't know' I've never been married yet, and if you're going to stand on those regulations of yours and refuse to give just one little letter back, just *once* in forty years, I don't suppose I ever shall be '

It's not that I'm heartless, but at that I just have to laugh. 'Oh, come on,' I say to her. 'A pretty young thing like you Never married, that's a laugh ' '

'Oh, you're so clever,' she says, sad and angry at the same time 'You know everything, don't you? All right, probably if my entire happiness is ruined, I'll get over it one day, enough to marry somebody just for the sake of having a normal life and a family. But I shan't be happy.'

'We've all had it,' I say. 'Nobody in the world's good enough except just one person.'

'Don't you believe in love?' she asks

'Well, as a matter of fact I do,' I say 'I got married myself, soon after I joined the Post Office, and I can't believe I'd have been as happy with anyone else as I have with my wife I did all right when I picked her out But that was back in the days when marriages were made to last Everything's different with you young people to-day'

'You think so?' she says 'Really different?'

'Course it is,' I say 'All the romance has gone out of it Well, look at it Sex, sex, sex from morning to night and never a bit of sentiment'

'What's wrong with sex?' she says, looking stubborn

'Nothing,' I say, 'only in my day we didn't try to build a fire with nothing but kindling.' •

I turn away, thinking I'll leave her to chew that one over I'm just getting the van door open when suddenly she's there, grabbing at my wrist

'Please,' she says '*Please* You've got a kind face. I know you'd help me if only you knew'

'Well, I haven't got time to know,' I say, trying to get free 'I thought you said it would be sixty seconds'

'I wrote a letter to the man I'm in love with,' she says, speaking very quickly and holding on to my wrist. 'A horrible, hurtful letter telling him I didn't want any more to do with him, and saying a lot of horrible things that weren't even true Things I just made up to try to hurt him — to make him suffer.'

## *The Valentine Generation*

'And now you're sorry for him,' I say 'Well, write him another letter and tell him it was all a pack of lies '

'You don't understand,' she says 'It isn't that I'm sorry for him; it's just that I want him back And he'll never, *never* come back to me if he reads that letter He'll never forgive me '

'He will if he loves you,' I say

'Oh, it's hopeless,' she says with a kind of groan 'You talk as if love was so simple '

'Well, so it is,' I tell her 'If two people love each other, they want to be nice, and help each other, and make things easy I know there are lovers' quarrels, but they're soon patched up Why, that's all part of the fun of being in love You'll find out when the real thing comes along '

'The real thing ' she groans again 'I tell you this is the real thing, all the way through Look, why don't you believe me and let me take my letter back ?'

'I've told you why,' I say 'Forty years with the Post Office and you want me to start ignoring regulations '

'All right,' she says, speaking very low and looking at me fiercely 'Go ahead and keep your regulations. But think about it sometimes in the middle of the night. How you sacrificed somebody's happiness for the whole of their life, rather than break a regulation.'

'I've told you before, you're being silly,' I say

*John Wain*

'Look, I'll prove it to you Number one, you don't really love this bloke '

'Don't love him !' she wails 'How can you possibly tell that ?'

'Well, does it look like it ' ' I say 'You get your rag out about something, and straight away you write him such a stinking letter, full of insults and things that aren't even true, that you daren't go near him once he reads it.'

'That doesn't prove I don't love him,' she says. 'All it proves is that I was desperate Look, let me tell you what happened '

'All right,' I say, 'but make it fast And don't kid yourself that I'll give you the letter when you've finished' I meant it, too. Regulations mean a lot after forty years

'I usually spend Saturday evening with Jocelyn,' she begins Jocelyn I don't like the sound of that 'And last Saturday, that's the day before yesterday, he rings up and tells me he can't do it. He's got to look after his aunt who's coming up from the country. So when my brother and sister-in-law happened to look in and see me, I said I'd go out with them for the evening We went up to the West End and I said I'd show them a nice little restaurant I knew. So we went into this place and the very first person I saw was Jocelyn '

'With his aunt from the country,' I say.

'His aunt from the country,' she says, nodding and looking very grim 'About twenty years old

## *The Valentine Generation*

with a lot of red hair and a dress cut very low  
And there was Jocelyn, leaning towards her the  
way he does when he's really interested in a girl '

'What a surprise for him,' I say

'No surprise,' she says 'He never saw me I  
knew at once I wouldn't be able to stand it I  
wasn't going to have a show-down with him there  
and then, and as for sitting down and watching the  
performance and trying to eat my dinner, with my  
brother and his wife there on top of everything  
else, well '

'So you ducked out quick, and came home and  
wrote him a nasty letter,' I say Nine o'clock's  
creeping up and I'm ruddy nowhere with my  
collecting

'If only I *could* have come straight home,' she  
says 'But I have my brother and his wife to cope  
with He's always saying I can't look after myself  
I wasn't going to talk about it to him. So I looked  
round quickly and said sorry, this was the wrong  
place and I'd made a mistake They said it looked  
all right and they'd like to try it anyway, but I  
said no, I was so keen to show them this special  
place. So there we were, out in the street, with  
them waiting for me to guide them and me with  
no idea where to go We wandered about for ages,  
and my brother was in a filthy temper, and then  
I took them into a place and pretended that was  
it and it was awful. Oh, it was all so utterly,  
utterly awful. I couldn't even talk. I could only



*John Wain*

say yes and no when they seemed to expect me to say something I expect they thought I was mad '

'So after *that* you wrote him a letter,' I say, trying to move her along even though the collections have now gone for a dead Burton

'After that,' she says, 'I go home and spend a completely sleepless night I don't even close my eyes, because every time I close them I see Jocelyn's face as he leans towards this girl '

'All right, let him lean,' I say 'If he's the type that runs after every bit of skirt he sees, he won't make you happy anyway '

'But he *does* make me happy,' she says 'He's absolutely ideal for me He makes me feel marvellous When I'm with him I'm really glad about being a woman '

'Even if you can't trust him ?' I ask

'Casual infidelities don't matter,' she says 'It's the really deep communication between man and woman that matters '

I can see this is getting out of my league altogether, so I make one more effort to brush her off 'All right,' I say 'If your Jocelyn is in the deep-communication business, he won't be put off by a nasty letter. He'll see straight away that you only wrote it because you were angry or desperate or whatever it is '

'You're wrong,' she says, looking at me very steadily. 'There are some insults a man can't

### *The Valentine Generation*

forgive. Lasten, I wrote that letter on Sunday afternoon. I'd been crying nearly all morning, and every time I sat down to write I was just crying too much to see the paper. By the time I got down to it I was feeling murderous. I wrote things that I knew he'd find absolutely unforgivable. I laughed at him, I told him he hadn't been adequate for me, that I'd had other lovers all the time we'd been together. I must have been mad. I wrote so many details he'll never believe it isn't true.'

'You say you love him?' I ask.

'I love him and I need him utterly,' she says.

'Rubbish,' I say. 'The whole thing is beginning to get me down. 'If that's love, so is a boxing match. It's just vanity and sex, that's all it is. There's no love anywhere.'

'Well, perhaps that's not a bad definition,' she says, as if I've got all day to stand there and discuss it. 'I mean, one's need for another person is partly vanity, isn't it? It's all bound up with one's own belief in oneself.'

'One this and one that,' I say. 'You're just har-splitting. If you love anybody, you care for them, don't you? You want them to be happy.'

'That's a chocolate-boxy idea of love,' she says. 'I mean it's not what happens when real people get involved with each other. You may have been able to live your life by those ideas, but in that case you've been very lucky. You've never had to face reality.'

*John Wain*

Reality ! From a chit of a girl like this I'm learning about reality !

'What have I been facing for sixty years,' I ask her, 'if it hasn't been reality ?'

'Oh, I'm sure you've had lots of reality in your life,' she says 'I know you've had all sorts of responsibilities and everything It's just that your personal relationships must have been unreal You wouldn't talk about love in that sort of Royal Doulton way if they hadn't been.'

All at once I understand She's not giving me her own opinions She's just parroting what this Jocelyn's been teaching her Deep communication between man and woman ! I can just see his idea of it Especially if he's got her trained so that she doesn't even count the other girls he runs after And Royal Doulton ! That's not the sort of thing she'd think up for herself

'Listen to me, miss,' I say. 'Take an old man's advice and leave that letter where it is If it puts an end to this business between you and this Jocelyn bloke, believe me, you'll live to be grateful '

At that she stares at me as if she's caught me doing something so horrible she can't trust her own eyesight.

'It's unbelievable,' she says at last. 'If anybody had told me that—that ordinary human beings were capable of such stupidity and cruelty, yes, *cruelty*, I wouldn't have believed them.' And she

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begins to cry, quite silently, with the tears running down her nose

'Which of us is cruel?' I ask her 'Me, or Jocelyn?'

'You, of course,' she says, so cross at what she thinks is cheek on my part that she stops crying. 'You're making me miserable *for ever* just so that you won't have to admit that your ideas about love are out of date and wrong.'

'Whereas Jocelyn is sweetness and kindness itself, eh?' I put in

'No, of course not,' she says 'He's capable of hardness and aggressiveness and he can be cruel himself at times That's all part of his being a real man, the sort of man who can make a girl feel good about being feminine' That's another bit of Jocelyn's patter, if I'm any judge 'A man who was *sweetness and kindness itself*,' she goes on, bringing out the words as if they're choking her, 'wouldn't be capable of making a woman feel fulfilled and happy. He's got to have a streak of — of——'

'Of the jungle in him?' I say, trying to help her out.

'If you like, yes,' she says, nodding and looking solemn

'Well, I don't like,' I say, letting it rip for once 'I think you're a nice girl, but you're being very silly. You've let this Jocelyn stuff your head full of silly ideas, you've taken his word for it that he can chase every bit of skirt he meets, tell her to

*John Wain*

you, string you along every inch of the way, and it all doesn't matter because he's going to make you feel happy and relaxed, he's going to make you feel good about being a woman because he's Tarzan of the flipping Apes 'No, listen to me,' I tell her, because I can see she's trying to stick her oar in, 'I've stood here and listened to your story and made myself so late that the collections won't be right for the whole of to-day, and now I'm going to tell you what you ought to do You're a nice girl. Cut this Jocelyn out of your life like the rotten thing he is Go and find some young man who'll tell you that as a woman you deserve to be cherished and taken care of Who'll love you enough to tell you the truth and play fair with you Even if he isn't an animal out of the Zoo Make do with an ordinary human being,' I say to her 'You'll find it cheaper in the long run'

Instead of answering, she just stands there crying All right, I think to myself, let her get on with it. I've given her the right advice and that's the end

I get into the van and press the self-starter I'd left the engine running but it doesn't idle fast enough on these crisp mornings, and it's stalled So anyway, I start it up and I'm just going to engage gear and move off when, for some reason, I can't do it My foot comes off the accelerator and I look out of the window. There she is, still crying Now's your cue to call me a sentimental old fool.

## *The Valentine Generation*

So I get out of the van again and I go back to where she's standing, crying her eyes out.

'Look, miss,' I say, 'it's the best thing, you know. He wouldn't have been any good to you.'

'Why—' she begins, but she's crying too much to talk. I wait a bit and she has another go and this time it comes out. 'Why are you so sure that you know best and that I must be wrong?' she asks me.

'Well, it's simple,' I say. 'I've had a happy marriage for nearly forty years. So naturally I know how they work. I know what you have to do.'

'But love *changes*!' she says, bringing it out as if she's struggling for words that'll convince me. 'I'm sure you've been happy, but you're wrong if you think that your way of being happy would work for young people to-day. You belong to a different generation.'

'And that makes me not human?' I ask. 'Look, I've been happy with May for forty years and we've had three children. That's not done without love.'

'Your kind of love,' she says. 'Your generation's kind. I'll bet you used to send each other Valentines with sentimental rhymes on them.'

That gets my rag out. 'Yes, so we damn well did,' I say. 'And not only that. We used to give one another keepsakes. Listen, the first time we ever went for a walk in the country, when we were courting, I picked some flowers for May and she took them home and pressed them between the

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leaves of a book — *and she's got them to-day* ! Can you understand that ?' I wanted to love her and take care of her because she was a woman — that was the way I made her feel good, not telling her a lot of stuff about deep communication and keeping one eye out for the next little piece that came in sight 'Valentines !' I say, and I must be speaking quite loud, because some people on the other side of the road stop and stare at me, 'yes, we sent each other Valentines, big ones made of lace paper, shaped like hearts, some of 'em That's something else you wouldn't understand Try talking to Jocelyn about hearts !'

That's done it I've got carried away and now I'm as upset as she is I'm about ready to burst out crying myself And me forty years with the Post Office At this rate nobody'll get any letters at all

'You think I don't know what love is, don't you ?' the girl says 'You're quite sure that whatever I feel for Jocelyn, it's not love '

'Not what I'd call love,' I tell her 'But you've got to excuse me I don't know what love's supposed to be nowadays I come from the wrong generation '

'The Valentine generation,' she says, and all of a sudden she's smiling at me, yes, *smiling*

'Weren't there women in your generation,' she says, 'who loved men and went on loving them even if they didn't treat them right ? Didn't they

## *The Valentine Generation*

sometimes love husbands who got drunk or stayed away all night ?' ;

'I've known the type,' I say

'And what did you think about them ?' she goes on 'Did you think they were just fools who didn't know what they were doing ?'

'That was different,' I say 'A woman might go on loving a husband who mistreated her But at least she didn't say that she loved him *because* he mistreated her. She loved him in *spite* of it '

'Are you so sure ?' she says 'Was it always as clear as that just why she loved him ?'

'What are you getting at ?' I ask

'I'm trying to get you to admit,' she says, 'that other people might know what love is besides you.'

'I'm quite sure they do,' I say 'All I'm telling you is that you're wrong if you think you love this Jocelyn You can't love a man who brings you so low.'

'And you're not even going to let me try,' she says, not crying now but just looking steadily into my face

'Look,' I say, just to finish it. 'Let's have a bargain. You tell me what you think love is, and if I agree with you I'll give you your letter back '

'Just that ?' she says. 'Just tell you what I think love is ?'

'Yes,' I say. I'm quite certain that whatever she says, it'll be something I couldn't agree with. Something from Jocelyn's angle.



*John Wain*

'And you'll give me the letter back?' she says

'If I agree with what you say, yes,' I say

'Well,' she says, without even stopping to think,  
'it's — wanting to be with somebody all the time'

'All the time You're sure?' I ask her

'It's wanting to wake up with the same person  
every morning and do everything together and tell  
each other everything,' she says

'You know that, do you?' I say.

'Yes,' she says 'I know that'

I go over to the van and get the bag out If  
anybody sees this, I can be sacked, forty years or  
no forty years But there's hardly anybody about,  
and a bargain's a bargain.

'I'll be very quick,' she says, rummaging away.  
She shuffles the envelopes like a pack of cards and  
in no time at all she's found her letter and it's  
away, safe and sound, in her handbag

'Bless you,' she says 'I knew you'd want to  
help me really'

'I did want to help you,' I say, 'and I still think  
I'd have helped you more if I'd hung on to that  
letter'

'Don't worry about me,' she says, smiling

'Just tell me one thing,' I say as I'm opening  
the van door. 'Your idea of love Would you say  
it was the same as Jocelyn's?'

'No,' she says, as chirpy as a sparrow. 'It's  
quite different'

'What's going to happen, then,' I ask her, 'if

## *The Valentine Generation*

you've both got different ideas about love ?'

'I'll take care of that,' she says I can see she's not worried at all 'It's what I feel for him that matters, not what he feels for me I just want him around, that's all ' •

I get into the van and this time I drive away The collections are up a big, tall gum tree I have plenty of time stuck in traffic jams and I keep thinking of her and Jocelyn How she doesn't care what he is or what he thinks or even what he *does*, so long as she has him Doesn't sound like happiness to me But all at once the thought comes to me, well, she'll probably get what she wants I mean to say, it didn't take her long to get me to break a Post Office regulation I'd never broken in forty years. She twisted me round her little finger, so it could be she'll twist him

But then, of course, I'm soft-hearted compared with a chap like that. The Valentine generation I wonder what May'd say Not that I'll ever know There are some things a man keeps to himself 'Was she pretty ?' I can just hear her asking 'Must have been, for you to stand there talking to her and get behind with your collections and finish up with risking the sack, and no provision for our old age' No, the only way to get an idea would be to imagine May at that girl's age. She was a real woman. Not much Royal Doulton there

I wonder.